2013

The Tip of the Iceberg: The Preparation of Special Education Teachers

Jill Kuehn
University of St. Thomas, Minnesota

The Tip of the Iceberg:

The Preparation of Special Education Teachers

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

By

Jill Kuehn

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

2013

UNIVERSITY OF ST THOMAS, MINNESOTA

The Tip of the Iceberg:

The Preparation of Special Education Teachers

We certify that we have read this dissertation and approve it as adequate in scope and quality. We have found that it is complete and satisfactory in all respects, and that any and all revisions required by the final examining committee have been made.

Dissertation Committee

John D. Holst, Ed.D., Committee Chair

Thomas L. Fish, Ed.D., Committee Member

L. Lynn Stansberry Brusnahan, Ph.D., Committee Member

March 22, 2013

Final Approval Date

ABSTRACT

This qualitative phenomenological study sought to understand how beginning special education teachers experience the relationship between their teacher training and their actual teaching practice. Effective and insufficient aspects of the teacher training programs of special education teachers were explored. Thirteen special education teachers across age and disability settings were interviewed to gather data regarding their thoughts on the overlap of their special education teacher training programs and their current job duties. The interviews were transcribed and coded. Using theoretical frameworks, the data were analyzed until themes became apparent.

The findings indicated that some areas of their special education training were adequate while others were not. Interview participants discussed effective teacher preparation in the areas of classroom experience, behavioral interventions, and work experience and other training. Paperwork and legalities, academics and curriculum, scheduling, time management, and lack of experiences were areas that interview participants described as insufficient. Analysis of the data revealed the benefits of hands-on experiences as well as life experiences. The analysis also pointed to special education teacher job conditions that were less than ideal.

Recommendations include colleges and universities including a legal and paperwork class, an “essentials” class to provide special education teachers with basic knowledge, as well as a mandatory checklist of tasks to complete while student teaching in classrooms. Other recommendations are directed toward policymakers. These include a change to special education license from grades K-12 certification to grades K-5 and grades 6-12 certification to allow special education teachers to be specialized in a certain age level as well as putting firm caps on special education teacher caseloads.

This dissertation is dedicated to my grandmother,

Antoinette Alfonso, who strongly believed in the gift of education for all.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Completing this dissertation involved the work and support of many individuals. I want to thank my dissertation committee: Chair, Dr. John Holst, Dr. Tom Fish, and Dr. L. Lynn Stansberry-Brusnahan. Thank you for being excellent role models in the classroom and for pushing my thinking in the classroom as well as during this process. Your insight, questions, and comments were insightful, yet challenging causing me to be a better thinker and writer.

To my husband, Lance: thank you for allowing me to be a student again. I know you made sacrifices that provided me with the opportunity to chase my dreams over the past several years. Thank you for the constant encouragement and help with brainstorming ideas when I was stuck. I realize you also picked up extra tasks around the house; they did not go unnoticed. To my parents, Al and Judy Grandt: thank you for instilling a love of education, specifically a love of a special education. You have taught me to believe that being an educator is the single most important job on earth. To my dissertation support friend, Aimee Pernsteiner: thank you for the positive emails and humor. I am lucky to have gone through this process with you.

Lastly, I want to thank the members of Cohort 23. We are a special group, and I truly believe we stood out. It was fulfilling to be a part of a program with such caring, inspirational, human, and kind individuals. Each of you is a leader in your own way and each has taught me something throughout our time together.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract iii
Dedication iv
Acknowledgements v
Table of Contents vi
Table of Figures and Tables x

Chapter One: Introduction 1
Reflexive Statement 2
Historical Background 6
Teacher Training in Residential Facilities 6
Civil Rights Movement 6
Categorical Teacher Training in Colleges and Universities 7
Public Law 94-142/IDEA 7
Noncategorical Training 8
Inclusion 8
No Child Left Behind 9
Inclusion Strengthened 9
Highly Qualified Teachers 9
Teacher Shortage 10
Response to Intervention 10
Summary of Historical Background 12
Statement of the Problem 13
Significance of the Problem 14
Key Terminology 15
Overview of the Chapters 17

Chapter Two: Review of the Literature 19
Topical Literature 19
Severity of Teacher Shortage 20
Characteristics of New Special Education Teachers 20
Attrition 22
Reasons for Attrition 23
Age and Experience 23
Life and Job Factors 24
Job Conditions 24
Behavior Challenges 26
Job Responsibilities 26
Job Satisfaction 27
Teacher Preparation 27
Teacher Perception 30

Field Experiences 31
Early Career Supports 34
Induction Programs 34
Principal Support 36
Theory within Literature 36
Brownell and Smith's Conceptual Model 37
Acceptance and Commitment Therapy 38
The Socialization of Teachers into the Workplace 39
Analysis of Theory 39
Need for Study 42
Chapter Summary 43

Chapter Three: Methodology 44
Data Collection 44
Participants 45
Interviews 49
Data Analysis 51
Wenger's Social Theory of Learning 53
Assumptions 53
Components of a Social Theory 54
Community of Practice 54
Rethinking Learning 55
Use and Analysis of Theory 55
Knowles Andragogical Model of Learning 56
Background Information 57
Assumptions of the Andragogical Model 57
The Concept of the Learner 58
The Role of the Learner's Experience 58
Readiness to Learn 59
Orientation to Learning 59
Motivation to Learn 60
Process Design 60
Climate Setting 61
Involving Learners in Mutual Planning 62
Involving Participants in Diagnosing Needs 62
Involving Learners in Formulating Learning Objectives 62
Involving Learners in Designing Learning Plans 63
Helping Learners Carry out Learning Plans 63
Involving Learners in Evaluation 63
Shortcomings 63
Use of the Theoretical Frameworks 65

Similarities of the Theoretical Frameworks 65
Wenger's Social Theory of Learning 65
Knowles' Andragogical Model 67
Validity, Generalizability, and Ethics 68
Validity 69
Bias 69
Triangulation 70
Generalizability 71
Ethics and Confidentiality 71
Chapter Summary 72

Chapter Four: Teacher Views of their Preparation Program Findings and Analysis 73
Findings 73
Special Education Teacher Roles 74
A Day in the Life of a Special Education Teacher 80
Organization of Findings 84
Effective Teacher Preparation 85
Classroom Experience 87
Behavioral Interventions 88
Work Experience and Other Training 90
Insufficient Teacher Preparation 92
Paperwork and Legalities 94
Academics and Curriculum 96
Scheduling 98
Time Management 100
Lack of Experiences and Expectations 103
Analysis 106
The Benefits of Hands-On Experiences 106
Hands-On Field Experiences 106
Hands-On Classroom Experiences 108
Analysis 109
The Benefits of Work Experience and Other Training 113
Analysis 115
The Working Conditions of Special Education Teachers 118
Analysis 119
Chapter Summary 120

Chapter Five: Conclusions and Recommendations 122
Conclusions 123
Overlap in Training and Current Practice 125
Room for Improvement in Training 125

Summary of Conclusion 126
Recommendations 126
Legal and Paperwork Class 127
Essentials Class 128
Student Teaching Checklist 130
Special Education Licenses 131
Caseload Caps 132
Future Research 133
Chapter Summary 134

References 135

Appendices 142
Appendix A: Participant Email 142
Appendix B: Special Education Teacher Interview Questions 143
Appendix C: Consent Form 145

Table of Figures and Tables

Table 4.1 Special Education Teacher Roles and Responsibilities 76

Figure 4.2 Themes of Effective Teacher Preparation 86

Figure 4.3 Themes of Insufficient Teacher Preparation 93

Figure 5 College and University Experiences that Align with Special Education Job Duties ...124

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Education is a topic that appears in the media daily. The quality of education American students are receiving continues to be an educational topic of concern. Teachers are in the spotlight with questions about their qualifications and licensure areas. Standards and expectations for special education are increasing too. Boe's (2006) research pointed to a supply and demand issue for special education teachers as the number of students receiving special education has risen in the past few decades nationally. There is a strong need for qualified special education teachers. At times, schools cannot find teachers with the proper special education licensure. In addition, the attrition rates of special education teachers are rising; in fact, Boe, Cook, and Sunderland (2008) reported that attrition and retention rates are at a crisis level. As a result, special education students are not receiving the quality education to which they are entitled. This raises a question regarding how effectively teachers are prepared to be quality special education teachers.

With the introduction of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), a United States Act of Congress, passed in 2001, special education test scores are being monitored more than ever before. NCLB is based on the belief that all students can perform at a certain standard through the establishment of measurable goals. Teachers are required to give state tests to all students at certain grade levels to demonstrate progress toward these state set goals. The Act requires Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) be made if schools want to continue to receive federal funding. AYP includes academic gains in both reading and math that will allow states to label all students as "proficient" by the year 2014.

In addition to holding schools accountable as a whole, NCLB also examines test scores of many subcategories of student populations, including students who have traditionally demonstrated lower test scores in hopes of closing the achievement gap. These subgroups

include students with disabilities. Therefore, there has been a recent push for the accountability of special education teachers more than in the past.

Reflexive Statement

For as long as I can remember, I have wanted to be a teacher. As a child, I loved attending school. Not only did I love learning, but I also loved the environment of the classroom and the school. As a daughter of two teachers, I, at a young age, learned about the importance and value of education. I remembering hearing my mom and dad talk about the issues kids faced as well as the politics they faced as teachers. I knew that education was a system of which I wanted to be part in hopes of affecting as many children as I could or making some changes to the current structure.

My mom stopped teaching to be a stay at home mom when my brothers and I were born. When we were in school, she tried to return to teaching, but teaching jobs were rare. She finally decided to return to education as a special education paraprofessional until she retired. Teaching jobs have been hard to come by ever since with the exception of a few shortage areas: math, science, and special education.

My dad was a special education teacher for students with learning disabilities in a school in a low-income area. As a child, I would help in his classroom on days I had off school. I remember how the students looked forward to going to their special education classroom to receive instruction at their level. They felt comfortable there and worked to the best of their abilities; it was apparent they felt accepted in that classroom and desired to succeed. They were thrilled when they learned a new skill or felt any amount of success while working. This is when special education became a strong passion of mine.

As an undergraduate, I knew that I wanted to be a teacher of students with learning disabilities. I also worked toward a degree in elementary education so I would understand the

foundation of elementary curriculum. In pursuing a double major, I was given experiences as a practicum student in both general education and special education classrooms. With each hour I spent in various classrooms, my passion grew. I knew that I would be teaching students with learning disabilities following graduation.

Teachers tend to overlook students with learning disabilities in large general education classrooms of students. These students tend to blend in and fall further behind without specially designed instruction. I wanted to be the teacher to create and implement the specially designed instruction for struggling students. For the past ten years, I have served as an elementary special education resource teacher teaching 20 to 25 students with a variety of disabilities including learning disabilities, health disabilities, emotional and behavioral disabilities, and autism. I teach in a Federal Setting one to two program, which means I can serve students up to 60 percent of their day. Generally, I work with student from 30 to 45 minutes per day in their area or areas of need. Some students demonstrate needs in several areas resulting in up to two hours in my classroom. Areas of need can include math, reading, writing, behavior, organization, or social skills.

During my first year of teaching, I realized that I was not just working with students with learning disabilities. I had several students with emotional and behavioral disabilities and autism. I knew very little about these disabilities or how to provide these students with the appropriate instruction. It was challenging and frustrating for me to work with these students, as I was not giving them what they needed. My background did not provide me with the skills to properly service their needs. Two years after I began teaching, I decided to pursue a masters' degree in special education, particularly to obtain licensure in emotional and behavioral disabilities and a certificate in autism. This was, by far, one of the best choices I made to

influence my own teaching. Not only did I learn skills to use while working with students with emotional and behavioral disabilities and autism, but I learned numerous strategies I could use with all of my students. I finally felt confident to serve all of the students who entered my classroom.

I have seen the outcomes of students with disabilities after they have had consistent years of research-based programming and instruction in a special education setting. I truly believe all kids can learn, and I keep the end goal of working myself out of a job in the back of my mind at all times. I strive to graduate students from special education each year.

Over the years, the school in which I work has contained several Federal Setting three programs for students with disabilities. Setting three programs are intended for students who have more severe disabilities that affect their educational progress and performance. These students spend more than 60 percent of their day in a special education setting with high adult to student ratios. In this school district, Federal Setting programs are also called *center-based* programs. For the past eight years, the school in which I work has held up to three separate setting three programs for students with autism and students with emotional behavior disabilities. Our school has had a large turnover in the special education teachers. In fact, one of the newer programs has been running for six years and has had five different teachers. The other two programs have been running for four years and each has had two different teachers. Two of these teachers have needed to leave, as the principal or administrators in special education did not renew their contracts.

Some of these teachers have left the field of special education all together. Others have moved to a different program and then on to several different programs in various districts. I realize the field of special education presents its challenges, as does the field of education in

general. Nationally, there is a strong need for special education teachers. Often times, schools cannot find teachers with proper special education licensure. Due to the shortages, teachers without licenses are often hired and those teachers are required to apply for a licensure variance from the state. Therefore, the quality of teachers has decreased. Teachers are teaching students with disabilities without the needed training to be successful.

Two years ago, I served on an interview committee. The district had posted two full-time autism teacher jobs and two part-time learning disabilities teacher jobs. A small committee interviewed ten candidates. Of those ten candidates, only one teacher was hired. The following year, the district did not offer a continuing contract to that teacher for the next school year. While many of the teachers had the licensures the district was seeking, few of the candidates seemed to demonstrate skills of a quality special education teacher.

As I have watched teachers come and go in my own school, I have several questions. I know that special education teachers are not just leaving my school. Special education teachers are leaving jobs all around the state and nation. I often check school postings to see available jobs in other areas. Most of the jobs that remain open are for special education teachers.

I question why teachers leave one special education job and go to another. I also wonder why special education teachers are leaving the field of education entirely. The Minnesota Department of Education (2012) has declared all special education licensure areas as shortage areas in Minnesota again for the 2012 – 2013 school year. There has been a shortage since the 2005 – 2006 school year. As I think about why people might leave jobs in education, I wonder if teacher training could be improved to provide teachers with the skills to be successful teaching in special education classrooms. Are teachers becoming frustrated and quitting or moving to another program or school in hopes of being successful? School administrators and principals

must see that some teachers do not have the skills necessary to succeed and choose not to renew their contracts in hopes of finding a stronger teacher. The stronger teachers do not seem to be out there. The research raises the question as to how colleges and universities are training special education teachers and how the training may be improved to increase both academic achievement in students and retention in teachers.

Historical Background

Special education has a long and detailed history. The history has ultimately affected the way that teachers of special education students received their education and preparation. There have been trends related to policy that have influenced the way students with disabilities were educated. In the following section, I provide the history of special education as well as the legislation around special education and the influences on the training of special education teachers in the United States.

Teacher Training in Residential Facilities

The training of special education teachers has seen many shifts over the past 150 years. The shifts reflected the developments in research, policy, and practice around special education (Brownell, Sindelar, Kiely, & Danielson, 2010). Early teacher preparation programs originated in residential facilities, where most students with disabilities were served, until legislation pushed toward equality for those with special needs (Brownell et al., 2010).

Civil Rights Movement

On August 28, 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King gave his historical and powerful *I Have a Dream* speech as a landmark moment in the Civil Rights Movement. Few people know that special education "literally rode into America on the coattails of the Civil Rights Movement" (Eskay, Onu, Ugwuanyi, Obiyo, & Udaya, 2012, p. 394). Dr. King spoke of making "justice a

reality for all of God's children" (as cited by Eskay et al., 2012, p. 394). The Civil Rights Movement was inspirational for many groups, not just racial equality groups. Some of these groups included the United Cerebral Palsy Association, the Muscular Dystrophy Association, and John F. Kennedy's Panel on Mental Retardation (Eskay et al., 2012). As these groups became strong advocates for people with disabilities, they pushed for awareness and new legislation.

Categorical Teacher Training in Colleges and Universities

As new public laws aimed at increasing the quality of special education services to students with disabilities emerged in the 1960s and early 1970s, changes in special education teacher training took place. These laws moved special education teacher preparation from residential settings to teachers' colleges (Brownell et al., 2010). These initial programs' focus was categorical, as they trained teachers to teach students with specific disabilities. Therefore, instructors paired certain strategies to meet the needs of students with one type of disability category (Brownell et al., 2010).

Public Law 94-142/IDEA

In 1975, Public Law 94-142 (PL 94-142) or the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, also commonly known today as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA, was developed (Eskay et al., 2012; Thornton, Peltier, & Medina, 2007). This law established "a clear legal obligation to provide free and appropriate public education for all students with disabilities" (Thornton et al., 2007, p. 233). Students were required to be educated in the least restrictive environment (Eskay et al., 2012). In addition, PL 94-142 mandated federal funding for special education (Eskay et al., 2012). IDEA also mandated a focus on academic achievement for students with disabilities through Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for each

student with a disability. An IEP is a blueprint of a student's school day as well as goals and objectives toward which the student will work. Following this law, over one million students, previously shut out of schools, began attending the public school system (Special Education, 2004). Prior to the legislation, many students with disabilities grew up in institutions (Eskay et al., 2012), segregated from their peers or they did not receive a public education (Fisher, Frey, & Thousand, 2003). In 1983, this law expanded to include supports for parents at the state level; in 1986, congress amended this law to include infants and preschoolers (Eskay et al., 2012).

Noncategorical Training

The 1980s brought another shift of special education teacher preparation. Teacher colleges shifted the focus from categorical to noncategorical. Brownell et al. (2010) stated, "Proponents of this approached viewed the learning and behavioral needs of students with disabilities on a continuum of severity and questioned the relevance of disability categories to effective planning, instruction, and behavior management" (p. 358). Therefore, either teachers were prepared to teach students in the mild to moderate range of disabilities or teachers were prepared to teach students in the severe to profound range of disabilities. The actual disability categories of the students that teachers were teaching did not play a role in their special education training.

Inclusion

In the 1990s, inclusion became the buzzword in special education. Inclusion, or educating students with disabilities in their general education classroom with their nondisabled peers, caused many to reevaluate the roles and training of special education teachers. Collaboration, a large role in inclusive teaching, became a crucial piece in preparing special education teachers (Brownell et al., 2010). As more schools pushed to include special education

students in their general education classrooms, special education teachers needed to design and implement instruction alongside general education teachers (Brownell et al., 2010).

No Child Left Behind

Today, special education teacher preparation faces more transition. With the implementation of NCLB in 2001, students with IEPs now need to meet an "accountability requirement," as measured by academic achievement. The NCLB Act changed how states view students with disabilities participating in the core curriculum, as mandates require special education students to have access to the general education curriculum (Brownell et al., 2010; Special Education, 2004).

Inclusion strengthened. In addition to the numerous Federal mandates, under NCLB, states hold students with disabilities to the same standard as those students without disabilities. Therefore, there has been a stronger push to include students with disabilities in the general education classrooms to access the school's core curriculum. This mandate strengthened the push for inclusion of the 1990s. With the focus on academic achievement, the media has spotlighted state standardized test scores, including test scores of students with special needs, under NCLB.

Highly qualified teachers. In addition to student achievement measures, NCLB calls for teachers to be considered highly qualified in the core content areas to teach students with special needs. Therefore, special education teachers are not only required to know how disabilities can cause challenges in learning and the strategies to intervene with these students, they are also required to know core content general education areas (Brownell et al., 2010). Brownell et al. (2010), stated, "Teacher educators and researchers are once again afforded an opportunity to consider how teacher education can be redesigned best to improve professional preparation" (p.

359).

Teacher shortage. Along with these mandates comes a teacher shortage in the area of special education. Thornton et al. (2007) stated, "for the past two decades, districts have not been able to employ enough highly qualified special education teachers" (p. 233). In fact, special education teacher shortages and attrition rates have been on the radars of policymakers for over two decades (Council for Exceptional Children, 2000). Sack's (1999) research indicated that teachers without certification filled nearly 30,000 of the 330,000 special education positions nationally during the 1990-1991 school year. During that same school year, 6,000 special education positions remained unfilled (Sack, 1999). A more recent statistic regarding the 1999-2000 school year indicated that 97% of all school districts reported at least one special education teaching vacancy in the U.S.; this equaled 69,249 special education teacher job openings (Connelly & Graham, 2009).

The special education teacher shortage challenge has not improved in recent times. In fact, at the end of the 2008-2009 school year in the U.S., 12,241 teaching positions in special education remained open or filled by long-term substitutes (Connelly & Graham, 2009). Substitute teachers often do not carry the proper licensure. According to Boe (2006), 11.4% of teachers lacked appropriate licensure during the 2000-2001 school year. Special education classrooms, in most states, have the greatest number of unqualified teachers (Payne, 2005).

Response to Intervention

Even with special education teacher shortages, new education movements, which have affected the jobs of special education teachers, continue to appear. The latest movement is *Response to Intervention* (RTI), a general education initiative. Unlike the old special education model, which is a reactive model that waited for students to fail before receiving special

education assistance, RTI is a proactive model. RTI "is a model that assesses all students on a three-tiered model to ensure that all students can learn and are provided with the necessary service" (Eskay et al., 2012, p. 405). The RTI model "holds potential to clarify and articulate special and general education teachers' instructional roles" (Brownell et al. 2010). Blurred special education and general education teacher roles have become the norm during the last few decades. In theory, this model should provide interventions to students at an earlier stage of struggling, causing fewer students to receive a referral to special education.

In the RTI model, at Tier 1, classroom teachers are responsible for teaching the general education curriculum to all students, determining and creating instructional modifications for struggling students, and using progress monitoring strategies to assess the effectiveness of the classroom modifications (Brownell et al., 2010). At Tier 2, classroom teachers work with a multi-disciplinary team to plan and evaluate interventions that are more intensive for struggling students. The students receiving these interventions remain in the general education classroom, but staff monitors their progress more frequently using precise measures (Brownell et al., 2010). If teams determine that students are not making satisfactory gains using the Tier 2 interventions, staff refers the students to Tier 3. At Tier 3, special education teachers provide direct and explicit instruction in an area or areas of need (Brownell et al., 2010).

While there is much hope for the RTI model, "it is clear that successful RTI implementation demands great teaching expertise" (Brownell et al., 2010, p. 371). At Tier 2, special education teachers need to have a solid grasp of both collaboration skills and the general education curriculum. Knowledge of these areas can allow them to create seamless instruction and interventions for struggling students (Brownell et al., 2012). Once again, there is a need for special education teacher preparation to focus on collaboration with general education teachers.

At Tier 3, "special education teachers must demonstrate, at minimum, a sophisticated knowledge base that extends beyond that of general education teachers, and this expertise must add value to the general education that students with disabilities receive" (Brownell et al., 2010, p. 371). To develop these skills and strategies in special education teachers, teacher preparation programs need to include strong and comprehensive preparation in both general education and special education.

Summary of Historical Background

Historical factors in the United States have affected special education in numerous ways. In addition to affecting how and where students with special needs were served, historical factors have played a role in how and where special education teachers were trained. Prior to the Civil Rights Movement, students with special needs often lived in residential facilities. Many did not receive a public education. Therefore, special education teachers received training in residential settings. Following the Civil Rights Movement, as people advocated for those with special needs, teachers began to receive categorical training at colleges and universities. Following the passage of Public Law 94-142 in 1975, many students with special needs returned to public schools to receive a free and appropriate public education with their typically developing peers as determined by their IEPs.

In the 1980s, the training of special education teachers shifted from categorical to noncategorical. Educators approached students with disabilities on a continuum of severity in terms of their needs. In the 1990s, inclusion took the forefront in special education. With inclusion, special education teacher training had a focus in collaborative teaching alongside general education teachers. In 2001, No Child Left Behind led to more changes for the field of special education causing the strengthening of the inclusion model. In addition, special

education teachers were required to become highly qualified teachers in math or reading. These mandates caused a notable teacher shortage in the field. More recently, Response to Intervention set even higher demands on special education teachers. In addition to having strong collaborative skills, a special education teacher is required to be an expert teacher who understands the general education curriculum, research-based interventions, and specific instructional strategies to instruct students with disabilities. It is clear that policy has driven the delivery of special education services for students with special needs over the last century and a half. While the training of special education teachers has changed to match the changes in service delivery, it seems as though the changes in special education teacher training have not been as drastic. Policymakers and educators have focused on addressing the special education teacher shortage. To combat this issue, colleges and universities have put alternative and fast track approaches to gaining special education licenses in order to increase the quantity of special education teachers. However, colleges and universities have not focused on the quality of special education teachers (Brownell et al., 2010). I will discuss the topic of quality and specialized special education teacher training again in Chapter 5.

Statement of the Problem

In reviewing the literature, I discovered a plethora of information describing and analyzing the issues of teacher attrition and retention in the field of special education. Some studies provided statistics around attrition, other studies analyzed causal effects of attrition, and even other studies sought factors influencing a teacher's decision to stay in or leave the field of special education. Despite the challenges involved in being a special education teacher and the statistics around the job shortage and attrition issues, there appears to be very little qualitative research conducted on the experiences of special education teachers in regards to their view of

the training they received from a college or university, resulting in a gap in research. A handful of studies (Billingsley, 2001; Boe et al., 2008; Boe, Shin, & Cook, 2007) used a survey to gather quantitative data linking teacher preparation to teaching practice. It is likely that stronger preparation of special education teachers would affect the attrition rates. There is a lack of research that provides rich description of the positive and negative characteristics of special education teachers' experiences regarding the matches and mismatches between training and actual teaching practice. Clearly, there is a need for a study that analyzes the preparation of special education teachers. I desired to learn how special education teachers view the adequacy of their training. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand how beginning special education teachers experience the relationship between their teacher training and their actual teaching practice.

Significance of the Problem

The United States Department of Education estimated that approximately 6.5 million children, from ages 3 to 21, were receiving special education services during the 2008 - 2009 school year (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Special education, along with math and science, make up the fields with the highest teacher turnover. However, special education teachers are more likely to leave than math and science teachers (Ingersoll, 2001). Ingersoll's (2001) research pointed to the fact that recruiting new teachers may not be the answer as many leave within a few years of beginning their careers.

There are many consequences for the special education students caused by the national special education teacher shortage. The quality of instruction that special education students receive has far-reaching implications (Billingsley, 2004a). Due to poor retention rates and the teacher shortage, students in special education receive instruction from teachers who are not

qualified to provide it (Payne, 2005). Therefore, teachers who are less qualified present students with fewer adequate education experiences resulting in lower student achievement levels. As a result, high school special education graduates enter the workplace ill-prepared (Darling-Hammond & Sclan, 1996). In short, a deficit in special education teachers leads to poor instruction for the students who struggle the most.

This qualitative study, which focused on the preparation of special education teachers, attempts to answer the following questions: Do beginning special education teachers feel that their college or university training was sufficient? Do beginning special education teachers feel that there is an overlap in the knowledge and experiences colleges and universities provided with their current practice as special education teachers? According to beginning special education teachers, how can colleges and universities better prepare special education teachers for their careers?

Key Terminology

Language pertaining to special education often contains acronyms and terminology specific to the field. In the following section, I present terminology to provide further clarification in the dissertation.

Categorical Training

Special education training based on instructing students of a certain special education eligibility category (www.disabilityrights.org).

Center-based Special education programming for students with disabilities who spend 60% or more in the special education setting for their special education instruction (www.elizabethschooldistrict.org).

Disability Limitation in the ability to pursue an occupation because of a physical or mental impairment (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

Federal Setting 1 Students who receive the majority of their special education and related services in a regular class. Includes children and youth with disabilities, receiving special education and related services outside the regular classroom for less than 21 percent of the school day (spedforms.org).

Federal Setting 2 Students who receive special education and related services in a resource room. Includes children and youth with disabilities receiving special education and related services outside the regular classroom for 60 percent or less of the school day and at least 21 percent of the school day (spedforms.org).

Federal Setting 3 Students who receive special education and related services in a separate class. Includes children and youth with disabilities receiving special education and related services outside the regular classroom for more than 60 percent of the school day (spedforms.org).

Individual Education Program [IEP]

This plan is for students who qualify for and receive special education services from the public school district.

Noncategorial Training

Special education training based on instructing students with several different disabilities (www.disabilityrights.org).

Resource	Special education programming for students with disabilities who spend between less than 60% in the special education setting for their special education instruction (www.elizabethschooldistrict.org).

Overview of the Chapters

I have organized this dissertation into five chapters. In Chapter One, I provided an introduction to the issue and reflexive statement. In addition, I described the statement of the problem and significance of the problem with the research questions of the study. Lastly, I presented key terminology necessary to understanding this dissertation.

Chapter Two presents a review of the literature related to the characteristics of new special education teachers, attrition, reasons for attrition, teacher preparation, and early career supports. The section also presents three theoretical frameworks evident in the literature reviewed: Brownell and Smith's (1993) Conceptual Model, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, and the Socialization of Teachers into the Workplace. In addition, this study presents two alternative theoretical frameworks used to analyze the data I collected.

In Chapter Three, I present the methodology of the study. This chapter includes a rationale for my research approach, sources of data, and data collection and analysis methods. This chapter also describes the two theoretical frameworks used in the study: Wenger's Social Theory of Learning (1998) and Knowles' Andragogical Model (1984). Lastly, I present the study's limitations and the ethics considered in the study.

Chapter Four includes the reporting of the findings as well as the analysis of the data. The findings include the eight themes under two broad categories that emerged from the data. The two categories include Effective Teacher Training and Insufficient Teacher training. Under

Effective Teacher training, the themes include classroom experience, behavioral interventions, and work experience and other training. Five themes emerged under Insufficient Teacher Training. Those five themes are: paperwork and legalities, academics and curriculum, scheduling, time management, and lack of experiences and expectations. For each theme, I present quotes from the 13 special education teachers interviewed, which I believe provide evidence for the theme. In addition to the presentation of the findings, this chapter includes the analysis of the data. I analyzed the data using the two theoretical frameworks: Wenger's Social Theory of Learning (1998) and Knowles' Andragogical Model (1984).

The last chapter, Chapter Five is titled Conclusions and Recommendations. This chapter presents a summary of the major findings as well as recommendations to teacher preparation programs to improve current practices. Lastly, I present possible ideas for future researchers on this issue as well as other similar issues within the field of special education.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This phenomenological study's purpose is to understand how beginning special education teachers experience the relationship between their teacher training and their actual teaching practice. It attempts to answer the following questions: Do beginning special education teachers feel that their college or university training was sufficient? Do beginning special education teachers feel that there is an overlap in the knowledge and experiences colleges and universities provided with their current practice as special education teachers? According to beginning special education teachers, how can colleges and universities better prepare special education teachers for their careers?

In this chapter, I provide a review of the literature around special education training and attrition. In addition, I assess what the research says on these topics. I also identify and show how specific theoretical frameworks within the existing literature have shaped research studies. Lastly, I provide an analysis of the theoretical frameworks as well as describe the need for my study.

Topical Literature

In order to conduct this study and to begin to answer the questions above, I reviewed literature from a variety of sources. I found much of the research around special education teachers through searching education databases. The key words I used included special education, preparation, and training. When I realized that most of the research pointed toward teacher development for current teachers instead of college preparation for pre-service teachers, I changed my key terms. New terms used included pre-service teachers, novice teachers, preparation, and special education. Seeing that there was little research, I expanded my search to include retention, attrition, burnout, and special education. Numerous themes emerged from the

large amount of literature.

In the following section, I review and assess what researchers say on the following themes: characteristics of new special education teachers, attrition, reasons for attrition, teacher preparation, and early career supports. In addition, I present existing theory used to frame the research on the topic of the training of special education teachers and teacher retention.

Severity of Teacher Shortage

The shortage of fully certified special education teachers has been described as "severe, chronic, and pervasive" (Billingsley & McLeskey, 2004, p. 2). While this shortage has been an issue for more than two decades, it has only recently begun to receive attention from national policy makers due to the implementation of NCLB (Billingsley & McLeskey, 2004). Much of the literature around special education attrition provided statistics regarding the number of teachers leaving special education jobs (Billingsley, 2004b; Billingsley & McLeskey, 2004; Boe, 2006). In addition, some studies have followed special education teachers to determine where they go when they leave their jobs, including to general education positions or to a different field altogether (Boe, Bobbitt, Cook, Whitener, & Weber, 1997; Boe et al., 2008). Other studies looked at both job-related and personal factors influencing special education teachers' decisions to stay or leave (Billingsley, Carlson, & Klein, 2004; Billingsley & Cross, 1992; Zost, 2010).

Characteristics of New Special Education Teachers.

There are approximately 300,000 special education teaching positions in the United States (Thornton et al., 2007). From data collected prior to 2001, Billinglsey (2001) found that of the new special education teachers hired annually, 50% accept jobs in suburban settings, 24% work in urban settings, and 26% accept jobs in rural settings (Billingsley, 2001). Billingsley's (2001) literature review of the characteristics of beginning special education teachers found that

71% of first year special education teachers carry special education certification compared to 94% of teachers with three or more years of experience. Of the new special education teachers, 25% felt that their preparation programs were not good matches for the realities of their first school-based teaching assignment (Billingsley, 2001). In fact, 84% of special education teachers with three or more years of experience felt their performance was exceptional or very good compared to 64% of new teachers who rated their performance as exceptional or very good (Billingsley, 2001).

Beginning special education teachers spend an average of 55 hours per week on their jobs, a number not that different from the hours that more experienced special education teachers spend on their jobs (Billingsley, 2001). In looking at the rate of pay for new special education teachers, Billingsley (2001) noted that beginning teacher salaries vary from district to district, usually based on the cost of living for that area. The average starting salary for a new teacher with a B.A. or B.S. is $35,284 (DiCarlo, Johnson, & Cochran, 2008).

Special education teachers often earn a license in one or two disability categories upon receiving their bachelor's degree (Billingsley, 2001). Forty-six percent of beginning special education teachers work with students from two to three disability groups and 31% of beginning special education teachers work with students from four to six disabilities groups (Billingsley, 2001). Less than 25% of beginning special education teachers serve students from a single disability group (Billingsley, 2001). In addition, 65% of beginning special education teachers serve students from cultural or linguistic groups different from their own and 30% of new special education teachers teach students considered Limited English Proficient (LEP) (Billingsley, 2001).

Attrition

In her thematic analysis of literature, Billingsley (2004b) stated, "One of the most important challenges in the field of special education is developing a qualified workforce and creating work environments that sustain special educators' involvement and commitment" (p. 39). The problem is not a limited supply of special education teachers, but the number of teachers leaving the field (Ingersoll, 2001). Ingersoll (2001) stated:

> The data suggest that the solution to staffing problems does not primarily lie in increasing supply, but rather in decreasing demand. In plain terms, teacher recruitment programs alone will not solve the staffing problems of schools if they do not also address the organizational sources of low retention. (p. 501)

Other researchers echoed this idea as they stated, "Special education attrition is considered to be the most troublesome issue facing the field of special education today" (Mitchell & Arnold, 2004, p. 214).

In contrast, Boe et al. (2008) conducted a study to examine the claim that attrition primarily caused teacher shortage. Using the National Center for Education Statistics Schools and Staffing Survey's data about public school teachers, the researchers concluded that annual attrition of both special educators and general educators increased steadily from around 5% to 8% in the 1990s (Boe et al., 2008). They compared the attrition rates of teachers to the attrition rates of both business and nonbusiness positions outside the field of education (Boe et al., 2008). The researchers determined that the rates were comparable, but both special education and general education attrition rates were lower than those of the business and nonbusiness positions (Boe et al., 2008).

In looking at teachers who leave teaching, also referred to as “leavers”, because they are dissatisfied with the profession or hope to find better career-related opportunities, one study determined that “only a minority of teachers leave to escape (about one third of SET [Special Education Teachers] leavers and one fourth of GET [General Education Teacher] leavers)” (Boe et al., 2008, p. 17). Yet, other researchers found a different rate of attrition. Ingersoll and Smith (2003) reported that 39% of teachers left to pursue a new career or a better job because they felt dissatisfaction with teaching. The data greatly vary in this area.

Some researchers believed that special education teachers left at a much higher rate than general education teachers did. Gehrke and McCoy (2007a) stated that a special educator is two and a half times more likely to leave the field than a general educator. Others (Mitchell & Arnold, 2004) found the rate of attrition of special education teachers over regular education teachers to be two times as many. On the other hand, some researchers (Boe et al., 2008) believed that the annual turnover for public school teachers in special education and general education was nearly the same, varying only by tenths of a percent.

Reasons for Attrition

Being a new teacher presents challenges; being a new special education teacher seems to present even more challenges. With special education attrition rates as high as they are, researchers have considered why special education teachers leave their current positions or leave the field entirely. The research provided the following reasons for the attrition of special education teachers: age and experience, life and job factors, job conditions, behavior challenges, job responsibilities, and job satisfaction.

Age and experience. The literature suggested that attrition rates are higher for beginning teachers (Boe et al., 1997; Boe et al., 2008; Lava, Recchia, & Giovacco-Johnson, 2004;

Menlove, Garnes, & Salzberg, 2004; Olivarez & Arnold, 2006; Thornton et al., 2007; Yost, 2006). Some research suggested that younger, beginning teachers leave the field at a higher rate than older teachers who have experience. Olivara and Arnold (2006) stated, "If special education teachers stayed in the field for five years or more, they would be more likely to remain in the field even longer" (p. 703).

Life and job factors. In a study surveying 4,798 special education teachers, Boe et al. (1997) found that several factors caused special educators to leave their positions. In addition to age and experience, they determined that children of teachers, both dependent children and the change in the status of child dependency, often caused turnover. Other factors that caused turnover in special educators included marital status or change in marital status. Teacher qualification, defined as a teacher holding the certification in his or her main teaching assignment, as well as how recently a teacher has earned his or her most recent degree both affected turnover. Special education teachers who did not have certification and teachers who earned a degree in the last two years were more likely to leave their jobs. Boe et al. (1997) determined the details of a job as another factor that affected retention. Full-time teachers were less likely to leave than part-time teachers were. Elementary teachers were more likely to change schools than high school teachers. In addition to the age of the teacher, the base salary earned by a teacher was another significant factor that caused turnover (Boe et al., 1997).

Job conditions. Numerous studies found challenging job conditions to be the main factors causing attrition among special education teachers (Billingsley, 2001; Billingsley et al., 2004; Eskay et al., 2012; Fore, Martin, & Bender, 2002; Gehrke & McCoy, 2007a; Kaff, 2004; Lava et al., 2004; Olivarez & Arnold, 2006; Payne, 2005; Thornton et al., 2007; Wasburn-Moses, 2005; Yost, 2006). Several researchers discussed special education teachers working

with large numbers of students (Olivarez & Arnold, 2006; Thornton et al., 2007; Wasburn-Moses, 2005; Yost, 2006). Olivarez and Arnold (2006) stated that high levels of attrition in special education teachers "may have much to do with the characteristics of the students that they teach and the overall standards and expectations that come with the particular job duties" (p. 703). Caseloads, the number of students that a special education teacher is concerned about during a year, that were large are another factor in special education teacher attrition (Thornton et al., 2007; Wasburn-Moses, 2005; Yost, 2006). Eskay et al. (2012) noted that special education teachers often work in isolation by "working with a specific group of children with overwhelming individual needs in resource rooms" (p. 398).

In addition to the large number of special education students a teacher case manages, another challenge is managing the workload expected, including paperwork and other federal mandated aspects of the job. Billingsley (2001) described this problem in her review of literature:

> Twenty-nine percent of beginning teachers and 24 percent of experienced teachers indicate that workload manageability is a problem. Routine duties and paperwork interfere with the teaching duties of many beginning teachers (72%). Surprisingly, a larger percent of their more experienced colleagues indicate problems with routine duties and paperwork (82%). (p. 4)

Another study indicated that special education teachers spend a small portion of the day teaching students with special needs. In fact, they spend about as much time teaching as they do completing paperwork and perform other supporting duties (Vannest, Soares, Harrison, Brown, & Parker, 2010). Eskay et al. (2012) echoes the challenges of federal mandates: "Because of specific laws and IEP requirements, special educators must document progress for each

individual student, which equals many hours outside of the classroom" (p. 399).

According to a study that analyzed the working conditions of new teachers, nearly one-third of beginning special educators reported that the workload was not manageable at all or only manageable to "a small extent" (Billingsley et al., 2004, p. 338). In this same study, over three-fourths of new special education teachers indicated that other duties and completing paperwork interfered with teaching moderately or greatly (Billingsley et al., 2004).

There are reports that many special education teachers transfer to general education teaching positions. In 2000, 33,000 special educators transferred to general education positions (Boe, 2006). However, researchers stated that special education received equally as many teachers who have transferred from general education (Boe, 2006; Boe et al., 2008).

Behavior challenges. In addition to paperwork, the inclusion of students with special needs into general education classrooms also caused challenges for new special education teachers. Federally mandated behavior plans, which alter approaches in dealing with the discipline of special education students, are yet another stressor for special education teachers (Fore et al., 2002). While generally there do not seem to be large differences between the attrition of special education teachers of certain disabilities, there does seem to be a higher rate for special education teachers working with students with behavior disabilities (Kaff, 2004; Mitchell & Arnold, 2004). In fact, Mitchell and Arnold (2004) noted that teachers ages 20 to 30 who teach in a small town and come directly from the university setting seem to be the teachers who struggled the most with student behavior. The behaviors of students in second grade through seventh grade seem to be the most challenging for special educators (Mitchell & Arnold, 2004).

Job responsibilities. As behavior issues can lead to stress in special educators, so can

the demands of the responsibilities of special educators. The job of a special education teacher often comes with loosely defined job descriptions (Menlove et al., 2004). In a review of literature, Payne (2005) stated:

> Special education teachers are valued for their commitment to serve such a vast dimensional groups [sic]. Teachers in the field of special education work very hard to fit a *one-size fits all* plan into a formula that does not work for everyone. (p. 88)

In fact, special education teachers often have certain roles that are unique to their position, often leading to confusion and few people to turn to for assistance (Gehrke & McCoy 2007a).

Job satisfaction. While some studies looked at the job descriptions, roles, and responsibilities of special educators, others looked at the job satisfaction and commitment of special educators. Billingsley and Cross (1992) stated, "Our study suggests that special educators may be less committed to their employing school divisions than general educators" (p. 468). Reasons for this lack of commitment may include the large number of jobs available to special educators. Therefore, younger special education teachers have numerous options in terms of their jobs allowing them to be less committed than for jobs that are harder to obtain (Billingsley & Cross, 1992).

Teacher preparation. The preparation of the special education teachers is often scrutinized as standardized test scores become public. Bishop, Brownell, Klingner, Leko, and Galman (2010) spoke to the importance of teacher preparation: "What teachers learn prior to entering the classroom makes a difference in their success. The quality and intensity of as well as the components that are incorporated into the learning directly influence a beginner's ability to teach" (p. 77). While good preparation leads to good teaching, Brownell et al. (2010) noted that the preparation of special education teachers has lost focus despite the variety of needs within the

special education population. They state, "for students with disabilities, *successful teaching* has been redefined to mean satisfactory progress in the general education curriculum" (p.358). In fact, they are calling for a change in how special education teachers receive training.

In their study of 20,952 beginning general education teachers and special education teachers, Boe et al. (2007) determined that today's colleges and universities are not producing the types of highly qualified teachers called for by NCLB; the requirements are too difficult. According to NCLB, a highly qualified teacher has a bachelor's degree, full license or certification, and an expertise in the subject matter of each core subject taught by the teacher (Boe, 2006). While this may seem to have positive implications for students with special needs, Billingsley and McLeskey (2004) questioned the implications of NCLB on special educators as they said:

> Although a mandate for highly qualified teachers and related legislation has the *potential* for increasing the number of certified special education teachers, it also has the potential for exacerbating the teacher shortage. For example, if the content area requirement in NCLB is applied to secondary-level special education teachers, these teachers will be required to hold certification in *both* special education and the content area they teach (e.g. mathematics, which is also an area of teacher shortage). (p. 2)

This would add up to teachers obtaining two degrees from their college or university.

To accommodate the teacher shortage, many higher education institutions use an Alternative Teacher Program (ATP) instead of the Traditional Teacher Preparation (TTP) (Boe et al., 2007). The main difference between these two paths is the ATP generally targets individuals with degrees who are looking for a quick route to a full-time paid teaching position. The teacher candidates enrolled in the ATP are usually not required to complete unpaid student teaching (Boe

et al., 2007).

One study examined the perceptions of teachers who earned licensure through at ATP (Casey, Dunlap, Brister, & Davidson, 2011). In a study of 52 first, second, and third year teachers who had earned special education licensure through an ATP, over 60% of teachers reported they struggled with lesson planning. Forty-nine percent of these teachers felt they were not confident in meeting the academic needs of their students. In terms of meeting the social or emotional needs of their students, almost 40% said they struggled to do so (Casey et al., 2011). Just over half of these teacher noted that following lesson planning, classroom management was their second most difficult area. In addition to rating areas that were difficult, the 52 teachers in this study rated the frequency of asking for help around certain topics. The topics in which the teachers sought help the most frequently included time management, lesson planning, curriculum, assessment, legal issues, district policies, paperwork expectations and policies, and communicating with parents (Casey et al., 2011).

While teachers who earned a licensure through an ATP do not feel ready to meet the challenges of being a special education teacher, many special education teachers are teaching without special education preparation or a special education teaching license. Despite the efforts of colleges and universities, there continues to be many special education teachers teaching without the appropriate licensure. Connelly and Graham (2009) surmised that the shortage of special education teachers leaves jobs open to those without proper certification. During the 2000-2001 school year, 47,532 (11.4%) of special education teachers lacked the appropriate license to teach (Billingsley, 2004a). The lack of licensure left 808,000 students with disabilities during the 2000-2001 school year taught by teachers without certification (Connelly & Graham,

2009). In addition, the special education teachers who lack licensures are more likely to add to the attrition rates than those who hold proper certification (Billingsley, 2004a).

Several researchers found that special education teachers have minimal preparation (Billingsley, 2001; Billingsley, 2004a; Billingsley, 2004b; Boe et al., 2007; Brownell et al., 2010; Connelly & Graham, 2009; Lava et al., 2004, Mitchell & Arnold, 2004; Menlove et al., 2004; Payne, 2005). Payne (2005) stated, "Researchers have found many special education teachers to be unprepared for all the responsibilities that the job encompasses. Some say that this leads to early burnout and disillusionment in teaching children with special needs" (p. 88).

Teacher perception. In their research, Boe et al. (2008) found that only 46% of beginning special education teachers reported that they were "extensively prepared" to teach students with special needs; others had preparation only in general education or felt their preparation was inadequate. Not surprisingly, there is a direct correlation between extensive preparation and qualified teachers. In other words, both general education and special education teachers who received training that is more extensive were determined to be more effective teachers than those who received less preparation (Boe et al., 2007).

In their study, Boe et al. (2007) examined both special education teachers and general education teachers with five or less years of experience. The teachers rated their level of preparation. In the areas of pedagogy and practice teaching, 83% of special education teachers felt they had extensive preparation, 12% of special education teachers felt they had some preparation, and 5% of special education teachers felt they had no teacher preparation (Boe et al., 2007). Of the 83% of the teachers who felt they had extensive preparation, they reported that they were more effective in the following seven areas: teaching assigned subject matter, selecting curricular materials, planning lessons effectively, using a variety of instructional methods,

assessing students, handling classroom management, and using computers in instruction (Boe et al., 2007).

In the same study, general education teachers who indicated that they had extensive preparation felt that they were more effective in areas at a higher rate than special education teachers in the following areas: teaching assigned subject matters, planning lessons effectively, using a variety of instructional strategies, and using computers in instruction (Boe et al., 2007). In contrast, special educators felt more prepared than general educators did in the following areas: selecting curricular materials, assessing students, and handling classroom management (Boe et al., 2007). This raises a question about the differences between the teacher preparation for general educators and special educators.

Field experiences. Connelly and Graham (2009) recognized the challenges involved in being a teacher as they stated, "Some reasons for attrition may lie beyond the ability of pre-service preparation to prevent them" (p. 258). However, they and many other researchers believed in the importance of teacher preparation at the college and university level in order to reduce the rate of special education teacher attrition. Teacher practicums or field experience are important for pre-service teachers. This environment provides student teachers a venue to practice strategies and to apply the methods learned in classes. In addition, it provides the experience of coping with the stress of the job (Nonis & Jernice, 2011). Connelly and Graham (2009) supported the need for strong teacher preparation as they said, "Teacher educators must identify and promote aspects of pre-service preparation that are essential to immunizing beginning special educators against an early departure from the field" (p. 258). In contrast, Billingsley (2004b) stated, "Little is known about how educational background, preparation, or classroom practice is related to career longevity" (p. 52).

It appears that knowing how to best prepare teachers remains unknown. One study looked at the length of student teaching among special education teachers in comparison to attrition rates (Connelly & Graham, 2009). The researchers of this study concluded that student teachers who spend less than 10 weeks in the field as a student teacher have a greater risk for leaving the field than those who have more student teaching experience (Connelly & Graham, 2009). To better prepare teachers, Billingsley (2001) made the suggestions to:

> enhance field-based experiences for prospective teachers to help them acquire practical skills, understand the challenges and rewards of teaching special education (including the range of professional responsibilities), and access the supports available through many school systems to reduce the difficulties experience by many beginning teachers. (p. 6)

In addition to looking at the length of field experiences for special educators, it is also important to examine the quality of the field experiences. Providing future educators with a variety of experiences is important. According to Mitchell and Arnold (2004):

> Universities may need to examine student teaching programs. Universities need to probe into the amount or quality of time the student teacher has in classroom management from a variety of settings. Securing training in classrooms with multiple disciplines to expose and acquaint the student teacher with the demands that will be required is an option. (p. 219)

Researchers provided more support for the importance of student teaching. One study recommended helping pre-service teachers develop a more realistic view of their first years of teaching (Fore et al., 2002). The experience of field study can provide this view. In a study consisting of interviewing and observing second year teachers, the researcher was able to

determine suggestions from the data (Yost, 2006). One idea stated was "Successful field and student teaching experiences that are connected to coursework build teachers' confidence and self-efficacy and thus encourage a higher level of competence in their first year of teaching" (Yost, 2006, p. 65). During interviews, teachers stressed the importance of completing field experiences early in their college preparation to develop confidence for later field experiences (Yost, 2006).

Another study found similar positive experiences during field experiences for pre-service special education teachers. The 33 teachers in the study felt that their field experiences provided them with a wide variety of experiences. Following their ten-week field experience, they felt:

> they were better able to understand their pupils' needs, they were able to link what they learned in their courses to the SET [Special Education Teacher] practicum, they could write IEPs and deliver their lessons to the pupils and they had overall good rapport with both their school and University supervisors. (p. 14)

Due to the benefits of field experiences, colleges and universities have used creative solutions to assist with field experiences, including student teaching and those experiences prior to student teaching due to the impact of learning on teacher candidates (Payne, 2005). One solution included building and maintaining partnerships between schools and universities; the partnerships not only helped prepare teachers, but also assisted schools in filling job openings that are difficult to fill with qualified special education teachers (Payne, 2005).

Researchers suggested the need to refocus teacher preparation programs in a few different ways (Lava et al., 2004; Payne, 2005). Payne (2005) determined a link between teacher attrition and leadership in special education teachers. Many special education teacher preparation programs include few, if any, courses that allow future special educators to develop leadership

skills (Payne, 2005). With the lack of empowerment that many special education teachers feel, leadership training and development would allow special educators to better understand the local control of a principal (Payne, 2055). Others suggested the need to change teacher preparation programs to meet the new demands special education teachers face in today's schools (Kaff, 2004). The roles of special education teachers have changed forcing special educators to "provide consultation and classroom assistance through support staff as well as their own interaction with many general education teachers" (Kaff, 2004, p. 16).

In a qualitative study that gathered the views of novice early childhood special educators through focus groups, Lava et al. (2004) made recommendations based on the information provided. The study's participants suggested that teacher preparation programs needed to offer more hands-on experiences in instructing students. The inexperienced special educators also felt a need to have more simulated situations in dealing with conflict with parents and other professionals (Lava et al., 2004).

Early Career Supports

In addition to providing strong teacher preparation during a special educator's college training, many advocated for providing assistance during the early years of teaching. District support reduces attrition in special education teachers. The support can come in many forms, including induction programs and support from administrators.

Induction programs. A common form of support to new general education and special education teachers includes induction programs. Structured induction programs often pair new teachers with mentor teachers, hold meetings and trainings for new teachers, and allow teachers to receive formative feedback on their teaching (Gehrke & McCoy, 2007a). In their study analyzing induction support in districts, Billingsley et al. (2004) found that 66% of new teachers

reported that formal mentoring was helpful to a moderate or great extent and 63% of new teachers found meetings with other new teachers to be helpful to a moderate or great extent. Interestingly enough, 89% of new teachers said that informal help from colleagues was also helpful to a moderate or great extent; this would include help outside of an induction or mentor program (Billingsley et al., 2004).

Regardless, many researchers determined a need for induction programs for new special education teachers, particularly induction programs that can be flexible to address the needs of the special education teachers in the program (Boe et al., 2007; Billingsley et al., 2004; Gehrke & McCoy, 2007a). Others supported the idea of adaptability as they suggest "more varied and extensive induction programs tailored to a variety of specific circumstances" (Boe et al., p. 27). Billingsley (2004a) reported a connection between induction programs that are responsive to needs to decrease rates of attrition among special educators.

While induction programs are effective support for new special education teachers, there appear to be fewer opportunities for beginning special education teachers to be involved in these programs than there are for beginning general education teachers (Gehrke & McCoy, 2007a). This is unfortunate as Yost (2006) found great benefits to well-planned and extensive induction programs. Yost (2006) described this effect by stating, "Mentoring components in teacher induction program have a powerful impact on beginning teachers. Conversely, traditional induction programs that focus on transmitting knowledge in a short period of time have limited utility in enhancing the learning of novice teachers" (p. 69).

In a study in South Carolina, beginning teachers shared the successful components of their induction programs (Whitaker, 2000). The researchers based components on needs from a previous study of special education teachers. The induction program consisted of meetings for

both mentors and new teachers. Mentors were instructed how to understand their role in the mentoring process (Whitaker, 2000). New teachers worked in groups to draft an IEP and to analyze case studies of issues that they would likely encounter during their first year as a special education teacher (Whitaker, 2000). The school districts also gave beginning teachers a manual outlining special education processes to which they could refer during the school year (Whitaker, 2000).

Principal support. Principal support has a direct correlation with special education teacher retention (Kaff, 2004; Lava et al., 2004; Thornton et al., 2007; Wasburn-Moses, 2005: Yost, 2006). Special education teachers who viewed their environment as supportive were more likely to stay in their current role (Gehrke & McCoy, 2007a). In a study of 341 teachers in Kansas, Kaff (2004) concluded that 57% of special educators reported a lack of administrative support. In this particular study, limited administrative support was the most common concern of special educators (Kaff, 2004). The idea of the lack of support from administrators was also a theme in a study of novice early childhood special educators (Lava et al., 2004). Wasburn-Moses (2005) believed that principals influence a special educator's decision to stay. The researcher suggested four strategies for principals to utilize: "prioritizing collaboration, being personally supportive, hand picking mentors, and emphasizing continued learning" (Washburn-Moses, 2005, p. 36). Other researchers suggested working to keep the current special education teachers by focusing on the principal-teacher relationship through administrative support (Yost, 2006).

Theory within Literature

In the literature I reviewed, theoretical frameworks were limited. Some researchers would state a theory, define it in a few short sentences, and then never refer to it again (Gerhke

& McCoy, 2007a). In reviewing nearly 40 research articles, I was able to find three examples in which theory was presented. In this theoretical framework section, I present the following three theoretical frameworks evident in the literature reviewed: Brownell and Smith's (1993) Conceptual Model, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, and the Socialization of Teachers into the Workplace. In addition, I describe how these frameworks informed the purpose of research and research methods. Lastly, I present a need for my study along with the two guiding theoretical frameworks I used to shape my study.

Brownell and Smith's Conceptual Model

In their research, Brownell and Smith (1993) introduced a conceptual model for understanding the phenomenon of teacher attrition and retention. Their conceptual model incorporated *Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model* for completing research in educational settings. Along with the work of Bronfenbrenner, their model included historical and external factors that affect career decisions (Brownell & Smith, 1993). The researchers believed the model provided a framework for interpreting teacher interactions in the workplace (Brownell & Smith, 1993). These interactions demonstrated a picture of teachers within larger contexts. This model provided a vehicle for investigating and comprehending the wide range of factors and their connected relationships that influence a teacher's decisions to leave or stay in the classroom (Brownell & Smith, 1993).

Bronfenbrenner (1976) argued that "the environment is conceived topologically as a nested arrangement of structures, each contained within the next" (p. 5). In doing this, he categorized the structures as the *microsystem*, *mesosystem*, *exosystem*, and *macrosystem* (Bronfenbrenner, 1976). For the purpose of their work, Brownell and Smith (1993) defined the terms only as they related to research on educators.

Brownell and Smith's (1993) conceptual framework incorporated Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model (1976) with other factors that influence the educational environment. These factors include historical and external factors (Brownell & Smith, 1993). Historical factors encompass initial commitment to education, characteristics of the teacher, and their educational preparation (Brownell & Smith, 1993). Economic considerations, family relocation, and the structure of the labor market make up external factors (Brownell & Smith, 1993). Brownell and Smith (1993) believed, "it is the relationship of historical factors, external factors, and environmental interactions in the workplace that leads to a person's successful or unsuccessful integration into teaching and ultimately their decision to stay in or leave the classroom" (p. 271).

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

In their research of special education teacher burnout, Emery and Vandenberg (2010) used *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy* (ACT) to guide their research. They described ACT as an offshoot of behavioral analysis (Emery & Vandenberg, 2010). The broad goal of ACT is to promote *psychological flexibility*, the skill of channeling the here and now as a conscious human being (Emery & Vandenberg, 2010). This flexibility allows the individual to alter or continue in his or her current behavior when necessary (Emery & Vandenberg, 2010).

Psychological flexibility is associated with improved quality of life, boosted physical health, reduced emotional reactivity, and improved mental health (Emery & Vandenberg, 2010). In the workplace, psychological flexibility can lead to decreased stress and an increase in well-being, mental health, and job satisfaction (Emery & Vandenberg, 2010). While at this time, no research links the burnout of teachers to the goal of ACT, psychological flexibility; however, Emery and Vandenberg (2010) chose to do so because the key features of burnout seem to

suggest psychologically inflexibility. The key features include *experiential avoidance*, *acceptance*, *mindfulness*, and *valued living* (Emery & Vandenberg, 2010).

The Socialization of Teachers into the Workplace

The socialization of teachers was another theoretical framework that was present. Gehrke and McCoy (2007b) presented the socialization of teachers as the ways in which new teachers incorporate themselves into the profession of education and the schools, as a structure, in which they work. Socialization includes many factors, based on the individual teacher and the context of the school in which he or she is assimilating (Gehrke & McCoy, 2007b).

Gehrke and McCoy (2007b) believed individual backgrounds of teachers, encompassing their teacher training, and the context of their schools influence the integration into the workplace. The process of the integration of teachers included interacting with colleagues, participating in professional growth opportunities, and accessing resources to support their professional work (Gehrke & McCoy, 2007b). The socialization of teachers includes exploring the factors that lead to job satisfaction and professional growth in a variety of educational settings (Gehrke & McCoy, 2007b).

Analysis of Theory

In reviewing the literature, I noted that of the numerous research articles on special education teachers in their early years, only a handful used a theoretical framework to guide and anchor the research, demonstrating a tension in the literature. Without theory, the research quickly lacked a focus on the process. For example, Gehrke and McCoy (2007a) presented two theoretical frameworks guiding their research. The first is described as "the movement from novice to expert teaching is a process often thought to involve accumulating 3 to 5 years of classroom experiences" (p. 33). The second is the aforementioned theory of teacher socialization

into the workplace. Throughout their research, they frequently refer to the socialization of teachers as it guides their research and methods. The researchers simply graze over the process of improving the skills of new teachers with experiences. Instead, the researchers focus on accessing colleagues, mentors, materials, and professional development opportunities (Gehrke & McCoy, 2007a). The research around the topic of special education teacher preparation and attrition lacked strength and cohesion, leading me to raise several questions. One question is what role does teacher socialization play in the success and retention of beginning special education teachers. Another question is if teacher socialization does play a role in the success and retention of beginning special education teachers, what can districts and educators do to ensure a positive experience for beginning teachers.

The research from Brownell and Smith (1993) and Emery and Vandenberg (2010) presented theoretical frameworks to be used by other researchers to discuss the issue of teacher attrition, preparation, and burnout. Because these studies noted a lack of frameworks in the research around these topics, they presented frameworks for other researchers to use in future studies. Brownell and Smith (1993) developed their model not as a causal model to be tested, but rather as a model for creating and explaining attrition research. The researchers argued there is little information that described the variables affecting attrition. The researchers suggested future researchers conduct studies around the following topics: effective field experiences, including number and quality, the appropriate balance between coursework and fieldwork, and the knowledge and skills that are necessary for effective teaching for inclusion in pre-service programs (Brownell & Smith, 1993).

Like the research of Brownell and Smith (1993), Emery and Vandenberg (2010) presented their theoretical framework, ACT, to analyze special education teacher burnout in

future research. They stated, "while the problems of special educators are widely discussed in the literature, scant intervention research has targeted this population" (p. 126). While these researchers reviewed numerous studies that touched on the topic of special education teacher burnout, they noted the design limitations that existed. Emery and Vandenberg's (2010) review of literature pointed to small sample sizes and inadequate treatment fidelity. They also noted that many studies are too broad, and others are unable to use the results (Emery & Vandenberg, 2010). In addition to research design limitations, Emery and Vandenberg (2010) noted a lack of guiding theoretical frameworks, specifically for studies with numerous components. The researchers believed that using ACT as a theoretical framework offers promise in future research that addresses special education teacher burnout (Emery & Vandenberg, 2010).

Unlike the previous two studies that presented a theoretical framework to be used in future research**,** Gehrke and McCoy's (2007b) research applied the theoretical framework of teacher socialization. They believed their research, using this framework, extended the literature through the exploration of factors that led to teacher retention among beginning special education teachers in rural, urban, and suburban settings. In order to best incorporate the voice of the beginning special education teachers, the study used mixed methods consisting of quantitative questionnaires and qualitative interviews. The researchers conducted interviews to allow interviewees in six school districts in a particular state to explain their socialization into the school environment through access to materials, other staff, and mentors (Gehrke & McCoy, 2007b). The researchers only briefly describe the concept of teacher socialization and refer to it one additional time in their research.

Unfortunately, Emery and McCoy (2007b) were only able to conclude a few broad implications based on their research. These implications supported their review of literature, but

offered no new information. Emery and McCoy (2007b) determined that effective support for new special education teachers had a positive impact on a teacher's decision to remain in the field of special education. They believed the support should come from veteran teachers, resources and materials, and learning opportunities; this is information found in numerous research (Billingsley, 2001; Kaff, 2004; Lava et al., 2004; Thornton et al., 2007; Wasburn-Moses, 2005; Yost, 2006) completed prior to the research of Emery and McCoy (2007b).

Need for Study

Due to the lack of qualitative research on special education teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of their teacher preparation program, a study on this topic was appropriate and necessary. While many studies pointed to the issue of teacher retention and attrition rates, few analyzed the beliefs of teachers in regards to their schooling. Rich description of special education teachers' perceptions about the positive and negative characteristics of special education teachers' experiences regarding the overlap of teacher training and current teaching practice does not exist. Because the existing research around the topics of special education teacher training, attrition, and retention lacks a theoretical framework, I conducted a study, well grounded in theoretical frameworks, to fill in the gaps, specifically around beginning special education teachers and their views of the pre-service teacher preparation they received. I used qualitative methods that are firmly theoretically based to analyze the teacher preparation that special education teachers received in order to provide new knowledge for the field of special education.

In my study, I used Wenger's (1998) Social Theory of Learning and Knowles' (1984) Andragogical Model in order to provide a new lens through which to view the data. I discuss these theories in detail in the third chapter. In addition, an innovative study of this kind will also

contribute to the field of special education as it provides information to colleges and universities as to what type of training is necessary to better prepare future special education teachers. This study will assist in providing information on losing fewer special education teachers to other fields while administering seamless education services to students with disabilities.

Chapter Summary

This chapter contained a review of the relevant literature related to the traits of novice special education teachers. The literature presented the following themes: characteristics of new special education teachers, rates of attrition, reasons for attrition, teacher preparation, and early career supports. I reviewed and assessed what the literature said on those themes. This chapter also presented Brownell and Smith's (1993) Conceptual Model, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, and the Socialization of Teachers into the Workplace, three theoretical frameworks evident in the literature. Lastly, I described a need for my study using two innovative theoretical frameworks: In my study, I used Wenger's (1998) Social Theory of Learning and Knowles' (1984) Andragogical Model.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study, anchored by Wenger's (1998) Social Theory of Learning and Knowles' (1984) Andragogical Model, allowed beginning teachers to share their reflections on their own teacher preparation including aspects that were effective as they began their career. This study also provided beginning special education teachers with a venue to describe areas in which they needed more training or experience in order to be a successful new teacher in the field of special education. In addition, this study provided novice special education teachers an opportunity to reflect upon experiences that were effective to prepare them for their teaching practice. This study, phenomenological in nature, allowed me, as the researcher, to describe the lived experiences of novice special education teachers as they reflected upon their teaching training in relation to their current teacher practices. This information will be useful to college and university special education teacher preparation programs.

In the following chapter, I provide a rationale for my research approach, sources of data, and data collection and analysis methods. I also describe the components of two theoretical frameworks used in the study: Wenger's (1998) Social Theory of Learning and Knowles' (1984) Andragogical Model. Finally, I present the study's limitations, generalizability, and the ethics considered in the study.

Data Collection

This study utilized qualitative methods. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) noted that qualitative researchers "do not approach the research with specific questions to answer or hypotheses to test" (p. 2). Instead, the researchers are "concerned with understanding behavior from the informant's own frame of reference" (p. 2). In addition, Creswell (2007) stated, "the researchers use interpretive and theoretical frameworks to further shape the study" (p. 15). Because I

focused this study upon gaining an in-depth understanding of human behavior and the rationale for decisions made around behavior, I chose a qualitative study.

Participants

This qualitative research study examined special education teachers' perceptions of their college or university training in relation to their current teaching practice. Creswell (2007) stated, "It is essential that all participants have experience of the phenomenon being studied" (p. 128). In this case, all beginning special education teachers were able to reflect upon effective aspects of their training program as well as areas that were not as effective. Novice special education teachers described the successes and challenges they faced during their first years of teaching related to the college or university training they received prior to their first year of teaching.

To keep a broad view of special education teachers, I interviewed 13 novice special education teachers who had one to three years of teaching experience. I interviewed beginning special education teachers at all K-12 levels include five teaching at the elementary school level, five teaching at the middle school level, and three teaching at the high school level. I interviewed teachers across special education disciplines including teachers of students with behavior disorders, learning disabilities, cognitive disabilities, and autism. I also interviewed teachers who teach across Federal Settings to gain a perspective of those working with different severities of student disabilities. In Table 3.1, I present a visual of the characteristics of the special education teacher participants.

Table 3.1

Characteristics of Special Education Teacher Participants

Sex	10 female, 3 males
Age	Average age: 26, Age range 25 – 29
Level Taught	5 elementary, 5 middle school, 3 high school
Structure of classroom	9 resource (Federal Setting 1 or 2), 4 center-based (Federal Setting 3)
Average years of special education teaching experience	2.1
Method in which licensure was obtained	5 undergraduate program, 8 graduate program 13 traditional program, 1 online
Licensure type	6 special education, 7 additional licensure (4 elementary education, 1 history education, 1 music education, 1 physical education, health, adapted physical education)

This table discusses the characteristics of the beginning special education teacher participants including how they obtained their special education licensure.

Of the 13 teachers I interviewed, 10 were female and three were male. While the ages of participants ranged from 25 to 29, the average age was 26. Five of these teachers currently teach at the elementary level, five currently teach at the middle school level, and three currently teach at the high school level. Nine of the 13 teachers are considered resource teachers serving students up to 60% of their school day (Federal Setting 1 or 2) while four are considered center-based teachers who can serve students more than 60% of their school day (Federal Setting 3). This group of 13 averages 2.1 years of special education teaching experience. Five of these teachers obtained their special education licensures through an undergraduate while 8 teachers obtained their special education licensures through a graduate program. One of these participants earned a degree through an online graduate program.

In this study, I asked, via email, special education teachers to voluntarily participate in a semi-structured interview to reflect upon their experiences in their teacher preparation programs as well as their current jobs (see Appendix A for participant email). Therefore, my sampling method was purposive, a method involving designating a group of people for the specific traits they carry (Nardi, 2006). In this case, the specific traits include being a novice special education teacher in a certain disability area. I interviewed teachers in the Elizabeth School District (pseudonym). I also used pseudonyms for the 13 special education teacher participants. Because the teachers interviewed have different experiences leading up to their first, second, or third year as a special education teacher, I provided more detailed information on the 13 special education teachers in the following paragraphs.

Alyssa is a third year special education teacher. During her first two years, she worked in a middle school resource setting with students with behavioral and social needs. During her third year, she served as an elementary resource teacher with students with behavioral and social

needs. Alyssa earned a multi-categorical undergraduate degree in which she obtained several licenses include Learning Disabilities (LD), Developmental Disabilities (DD), and Emotional Behavioral Disabilities (EBD).

Barney is a second year center-based EBD teacher in the middle school setting. Prior to teaching special education, Barney was a music teacher for a year. He earned his EBD and LD licenses through a graduate program.

Dana is a second year center-based EBD teacher in the elementary setting. She previously worked as a special education paraprofessional. While she earned a psychology degree in an undergraduate program, she earned her masters' degree in EBD in a graduate program.

Deb earned a DD license through an undergraduate program. She has served as a center-based autism teacher in the middle school setting for two years. She is in the process of completing her autism license.

Jacqueline has completed three years of teaching in an elementary LD resource room. She earned both her elementary education and LD license through an undergraduate program.

Jessica just completed her first year of teaching as and EBD resource teacher at the high school. Jessica worked as a substitute teacher with her history education undergraduate degree. She earned her EBD license through a graduate program.

Katie just completed her first year of teaching as a middle school LD resource teacher. She is in the process of completing her LD license through a graduate program. She is currently working under a variance with her elementary education degree.

Kelly is a third year special education teacher in a middle school LD resource program. She has an LD license as well as an elementary education license from her undergraduate

program. She recently completed her masters' degree in Differentiated Instruction.

Laura is middle school LD teacher in the resource setting. Laura has taught for three years. She earned her LD license in an undergraduate program.

Molly is a second year special education teacher. Her first year consisted of teaching students with severe to profound DD using a license variance. Her second year consisted of teaching in the elementary students in an LD resource setting. Molly has an elementary education and LD license both obtained through an undergraduate program.

Scott is a second year high school EBD resource teacher. Previously, he completed a trimester in a middle school as a long-term sub. Scott worked as a paraprofessional for three years in a high school center-based EBD program. He has an undergraduate degree in exercise sports science and economics. He obtained his EBD license through a graduate program.

Travis is a second year high school LD resource teacher. Previously, he taught elementary physical education for two years. Travis has teaching licenses in health, physical education, and adapted physical education from his undergraduate program. He earned his LD license through a graduate program.

Wanda just completed her first year an elementary center-based autism teacher. She is working on obtaining her DD license through a graduate program. She earned her elementary education license through her undergraduate program. She worked as a paraprofessional before teaching.

Interviews

Interview questions consisted of open-ended questions that invited participants to share their personal stories (see Appendix B for interview questions). I recorded the interviews and they lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes. I conducted participant interviews outside of

instructional time, either during the summer, before or after school, or at a time chosen by the participant. In a qualitative research course with other students learning the qualitative research process, I field-tested similar interview questions. Other students and a professor provided me with feedback on my questions. In one question, I asked special education teacher participants to describe how the first year of a special education teacher is different from the first year of a general education teacher. I received feedback that these beginning special education teachers would not be able to accurately answer this question, as they have never been a first year general education teacher. In addition, I received feedback that one of my questions was actually two questions and should be separated in order to receive an answer to both questions. Following a revision process, similar questions were pilot tested in a small study.

I provided all participants with a consent form listing the goals of the study as well as the risks of the study (see Appendix C for consent form). In addition, I informed participants that all information will be confidential and will be read by my committee and me. I substituted the names of the participants with pseudonyms to protect their identity. I told study participants that they could choose not to answer questions if they wished. If participants chose to drop out from the study, I would use the data already collected, but no participants dropped out of the study. Following interviews, I sent interview transcriptions to participants as a member check in order to assure that data collected was correct. Eleven of the 13 participants responded saying the data appeared correct. As two did not respond, I sent a follow-up email to each participant. These follow-up emails elicited a response saying the data appeared accurate. Therefore, I made no changes to any of the transcriptions.

For validation purposes, this environmental triangulation design included interviewing teachers at different grade levels as well as teachers of students with various disabilities. Some

teachers taught students with primarily learning disabilities while others taught students with autism or students with emotional or behavioral disorders. The teachers interviewed were different types of special education teachers, some teaching students with more severe disabilities and some teaching students with less severe disabilities. Despite the various factors in the environments of the teachers including disability type and severity of disability, the findings remained similar across the changing factors. In addition, I extensively reviewed both qualitative and quantitative literature around the topic of the challenges of special education teachers and the link to teacher preparation and training. While a study like mine did not exist, some studies were similar in nature (Boe et al., 2007; Boe et al., 2008). The data I received from my participants were not that different from the data of similar studies. Reviewing the literature allowed me to guide questions to challenge what others had found. In most cases, I was able to support the existing literature.

Data Analysis

In this qualitative study, I utilized the design of a phenomenological study. The purpose of a phenomenological study is to "describe the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (Creswell, 2007, p. 57). In this design, the individuals were novice special education teachers and the concept was the overlap of teacher training and current teaching practice.

Following each interview, I transcribed the recorded interview. Through the process of coding, I initially explored the data to determine concepts in common among the interviews as well as emerging themes. Immediately, I noticed the themes of paperwork and the legal aspects of working as a special education teacher. In addition, I noted that many teachers spoke of their pre-student teaching and student teaching placements in both positive aspects of their teacher

training as well as insufficient aspects of their teacher training. Next I followed Creswell's (2007) suggestion to comb through the data in order to "highlight 'significant statements,' sentences, or quotes that provide an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon" (p. 61). An example of a significant statement is when Molly stated, "And I just realized, I went to college for five years, but this is just the tip of the iceberg." Another significant statement came from Ben as he described his graduate school preparation in preparing and writing students IEPs. He stated, "I had to do one IEP to be turned in for a grade, but in terms of learning what actually went into an IEP, there was actually very, very little involved in that." Using the numerous significant statements, I then developed "clusters of meaning" or themes (Creswell, 2007, p. 61). Immediately, I was able to see two very large themes of strong teacher preparation and insufficient teacher preparation. I was able to add smaller sub-themes into these two larger themes.

In completing the aforementioned process, I analyzed along the theoretical frameworks presented by Wenger (1998) and Knowles (1984). I completed initial coding informed by the theoretical frameworks of both Wenger (1998) and Knowles (1984), but was also open to codes outside of their frameworks. One code, which later turned into a theme, which could not be accounted for by the two theoretical frameworks, was the idea of the job conditions of special education teachers. Before and after each interview, using memos, I kept note of thoughts and impressions of the interview as well as occurrences that warranted my attention. One of the reoccurring thoughts was that of job conditions and if training could compensate or lessen the burden of the job conditions of special education teachers.

In the follow section, I describe the two theoretical frameworks I chose to guide my

research. In addition, I describe what the literature says about these frameworks. Lastly, I explain how I used the theories to influence my methods and analyze the data.

Wenger's Social Theory of Learning

Wenger (1998) noted that our institutions "are largely based on the assumption that learning is an individual process, that is has a beginning and an end, that is separated from the rest of our activities, and that it is the result of teaching" (p. 3). Instead, he advocated placing learning in the context of our lived experience. Wenger's (1998) Social Theory of Learning described learning as social participation. Wenger (1998) stated:

> Participating here refers not just to local events of engagement in certain activities with certain people, but to a more encompassing process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities. (p. 4)

In the following section, I will provide the assumptions of Wenger's (1998) Social Theory of Learning and the components of his model. In addition, I will describe communities of practice, his idea of rethinking learning, as well as some shortcomings of the theory.

Assumptions. While Wenger (1998) believed that many theories of learning exist and his was not to replace others, he proposed his theory along with a set of assumptions. Wenger's (1998) assumptions are as follows:

> 1) We are social beings. Far from being trivially true, this fact is a central aspect of learning.
>
> 2) Knowledge is a matter of competence with respect to valued enterprises – such as singing in tune, discovering scientific facts, fixing machines, writing poetry, being convivial, growing up as a boy or a girl, and so forth.

3) Knowing is a matter of participating in the pursuit of such enterprises, that is, of active engagement in the world.

4) Meaning – our ability to experience the world and our engagement with it as meaningful – is ultimately what learning is to produce. (p. 4)

Components of a social theory. Based on these four assumptions, Wenger (1998) called for the integration of four related components as a process of learning and knowing. The first of these is meaning – learning as experience or "a way of talking about our (changing) ability – individually and collectively – to experience our life and the world as meaningful" (Wenger, 1998, p. 5). The second component is practice – learning as doing or "a way of talking about the shared historical and social resources, frameworks, and perspectives that can sustain mutual engagement in action" (Wenger, 1998, p. 5). Community – learning as belonging is the third component. Wenger (1998) defines this component as "a way of talking about the social configurations in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursing and our participation is recognizable as competence" (p. 5). The last component is identity – learning as becoming. Wenger (1998) defines identity as "a way of talking about how learning changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our community" (p. 5).

Community of practice. As these four components are deeply connected, Wenger (1998) developed the term *community of practice*. Communities of practice exist in all aspects of one's life. We belong to many communities of practice at once in our homes, work, school, and hobbies (Wenger, 1998). In his book, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, Wenger (1998) provided several examples of communities of practice. He described families and how they develop their "own practices, routines, rituals, artifacts, symbols, conventions, stories, and histories" (p. 6). Despite disagreements, families continue to keep

themselves alive. If families fall apart, they deal with one another using creative ways. In addition to an example of a family, Wenger (1998) provided an example of a community of practice in schools. Though a school serves as a community of practice, several other communities of practice exist, both officially and unofficially, within a school including in classrooms and on the playground. Wenger (1998) viewed the communities of practice with great value: "And in spite of curriculum, discipline, and exhortation, the learning that is most personally transformative turns out to be the learning that involves membership in these communities of practice" (p. 6).

Rethinking learning. Along with communities of practice, Wenger (1998) made a case for *rethinking learning*. He looked at rethinking learning through the eyes of an individual, a community, and an organization. In relation to individuals, he stated, "it means that learning is an issue of engaging in and contributing to the practices of their communities" (Wenger, 1998, p. 7). In terms of communities, Wenger (1998) believed rethinking learning meant, "learning is an issue of refining their practice and ensuring new generations of members" (p. 7). Rethinking learning for organizations "means that learning is an issue of sustaining the interconnected communities of practice through which an organization knows what it knows and thus becomes effective and valuable as an organization" (p. 8).

Use and analysis of theory. Researchers have not widely used or analyzed Wenger's Social Theory of Learning. In terms of teaching training, some researchers used the social theory in relation to the preparation of math teachers (Gomez, 2009; Jaworski, 2006; Smith, 2006). These three authors used the theory to guide their research. Gomez (2009) used Wenger's (1998) Social Theory in his study of future mathematics teachers in their community of practice of the college classroom. He audiotaped discussions as they worked through a

learning process. He was then able to apply several aspects of Wenger's (1998) Social Theory of Learning including participation in a community of practice, engagement, and making meaning. Jaworski (2006) stated her belief about the relationship between improved mathematics learning and teacher development. Learning or the process of becoming takes places with other teachers in communities of practice (Jaworski, 2006). Smith (2006) used Wenger's (1998) Social Theory of Learning in her case study of a future mathematics teacher as she moves through his teacher education program. Smith (2006) discussed how the pre-service teacher's participation in college classrooms shaped her experiences "learning about teaching" to "learning to teach" (Smith, 2006, p. 620). In addition, they analyzed the data using the lens of Wenger's (1998) Social Theory of Learning (Gomez, 2009; Jaworski, 2006; Smith, 2006).

Fox (2002) analyzed several theories in his research. In talking about Wenger's (1998) book *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, Fox (2002) stated: the book "sets out a model or framework for explaining the main ideas underpinning the idea of communities of practice, and downplays the relations between the framework and wider social theory" (p. 854). Fox (2002) believed that Wenger's Theory of Social Learning lacked an interest in "wider social context and organizational politics" (p. 855). In addition, Wenger does not take power and inequality into account, as he should have (Fox, 2002). Despite Fox's beliefs, Wenger's theory is a good fit for the training and preparation of all future teachers, special education teachers included.

Knowles' Andragogical Model of Learning

The second theory used in my research is Knowles' (1984) Andragogical Model of Learning. In his research, Knowles (1984) presented his approach to adult learning, the Andragogical Model. In Knowles' (1984) book, *Andragogy in Action,* he presented his model as

a contrast to The Pedagogical Model. When describing the two models, Knowles stated, "I now regard the pedagogical model and the andragogical models as parallel, not antithetical" (p. 12). However, he viewed the Andgragogical Model as a better fit for adult learners. In the following section, I provide background information on Knowles, explain the assumptions of the Andragogical Model, and describe the process design and its elements within this model. Lastly, I note the shortcomings of this theory as well as its place in my research.

Background information. In the 1940s, Knowles worked with the YMCA in both Boston and Chicago and served as the executive director of the Adult Education Association. Following his tenure with the YMCA, in 1959, Knowles worked as a professor of adult education at Boston University until 1974 when he began teaching at North Carolina State University. When critics of andragogy began to arise, North Carolina State University forced him into mandatory retirement in 1979 (Carlson, 1989).

Knowles believed that children and adults learn differently (Smith, 2002). His main goal was "to advance the cause of the individual and of American democracy in the university and in adult education, in business and industry, and in Unites States society generally" (Carlson, 1989, p. 217). He quickly became one who worked to promote adult education. He used the concept of andragogy to build a theory of adult learning. He based his theory on the characteristics of adult learners (Smith, 2002).

Assumptions of the andragogical model. Knowles (1984) presented a newer approach to learning. In doing so, he compared his model to traditional learning using the Pedagogical Model. Within these two models, he compared the following aspects of learning: the concept of the learner, the role of the learner's experience, readiness to learn, orientation to learning, and motivation to learn (Knowles, 1984).

The concept of the learner. In the Pedagogical Model, the concept of the learner is "a dependent personality" (Knowles, 1984, p. 8). The teacher, as defined in the Pedagogical Model, has full responsibility for decisions about learning including what a student learns and how it is learned. In addition, the teacher makes all choices regarding when concepts are learned and if the concepts are actually learned. The learner, in contrast, is a submissive person who is to follow teacher directions (Knowles, 1984).

In the Andragogical Model, a learner is more self-directing. A learner is capable of taking responsibility for his or her learning. Knowles (1984) stated the challenges of being a self-directing learner based on previous learning experiences:

> For even though adults may be totally self-directing in every other aspect of their lives – as workers, spouses, parents, citizens, leisure-time users – the minute they walk into a situation labeled "education," "training," or any of their synonyms, they hark back to their conditioning in school, assume the role of dependency, and demand to be taught. (p. 199)

The role of the learner's experience. Experiences, in the Pedagogical Model, are of little value as learning catalysts. Instead, the teacher's experience, the words of the book, and the teacher's lessons are in the forefront of learning value (Knowles, 1984). In contrast, the experience of the learner in the Andragogical Model is highly valued. The Andragogical Model sees the learners as adults with both volume and quality of experiences. Therefore, adults are a rich resource for one another. This model encourages group discussions, simulations, laboratory experiences, problem-solving practice, and other tasks that rely on the experiences of adults (Knowles, 1984). Different experiences of the adult learners force groups to be heterogeneous. Understanding the knowledge of varied experiences, Knowles (1984) realized that experiences

bring "habitual ways of thinking and acting, preconceptions about reality, prejudices, and defensiveness about their past ways of thinking and doing" (p. 10). Knowing that downfall, Knowles (1984) viewed using the experiences to help adults become more open-minded.

Readiness to learn. In the Pedagogical Model, readiness to learn is not learner-centered. Students do not have the opportunity to explain what they are ready to learn; instead, teachers tell students what they need to learn in order to move to the next learning grade. In fact, readiness is a "function of age" (Knowles, 1984, p. 8).

Readiness to learn in the Andragogical Model "assumes that adults become ready to learn when they experience a need to know or do something in order to perform more effectively in some aspect of their lives" (Knowles, 1984, p. 11). Knowles (1984) believed that adults demonstrate readiness to learn after changes in life such as birth, job loss, divorce, moving, and death. However, there are other ways to bring about change including "exposing learners to more effective role models, engaging them in career planning, and providing them with diagnostic experiences in which they can assess the gaps between where they are now and where they want and need to be" (Knowles, 1984, p. 11).

Orientation to learning. Learning is subject-centered for students in the Pedagogical model. In this model, learners see the need to acquire certain content around a specific subject (Knowles, 1984). Teachers organize curriculum in units within the subject area. The teachers teach the units in an order that is logical to the subject (Knowles, 1984).

Differing from the Pedagogical Model, the Andragogical Model views adults as motivated due to their life experiences. The adults enter an educational experience with a "life-centered, task-centered, or problem-centered orientation to learning" (Knowles, 1984, p. 12). Adults and children learn for different reasons. Knowles (1984) believed that "For the most part,

adults do not learn for the sake of learning; they learn in order to be able to perform a task, solve a problem, or live in a more satisfying way" (p. 12). Therefore, the teacher needs to organize learning and learning experiences around life situations, not subject content. In addition, relevant learning needs to occur; learners need to know how learning can contribute to the tasks or problems they encounter (Knowles, 1984).

Motivation to learn. Motivation is the last of the assumptions Knowles (1984) compared between the two models. In the Pedagogical Model, students do not seem to have much intrinsic motivation; instead extrinsic pressures from parents, teachers, grades as well as the consequences of failure motivate students. The Andragogical Model "predicates that more potent motivators are internal – self-esteem, recognition, better quality of life, great self-confidence, self actualization, and the like" (Knowles, 1984, p. 12). Knowles (1984) recognized that others factors including a better job and higher salary may play a small role to motivate adults to learn too.

Process design. Using the Pedagogical Model, a teacher creates a *content plan*. While developing this plan, the teacher considers the content he or she needs to cover, how to organize the content into units, a sequence of teaching that is logical, and the methods needed to teach that unit (Knowles, 1984). Unlike the content plan of the Pedagogical Model, the Andragogical Model calls for a *process design*. In this design, the teacher acts as a facilitator. He or she is the designer of the process that will enable the acquisition of the content by the learners. Secondary to the process, the facilitator will facilitate the role of the content (Knowles, 1984). This model "assumes that there are many resources other than the teacher, including peers, individuals with specialized knowledge and skills in the community, a wide variety of material and media resources, and field experiences" (Knowles, 1984, p. 14). Within the process design, there are

seven elements including climate setting, involving learners in mutual planning, involving participants in diagnosing needs, involving learners in formulating learning objectives, involving learners in designing learning plans, helping learners carry out learning plans, and involving learners in evaluation (Knowles, 1984).

Climate setting. Knowles (1984) considered creating a climate that is conducive to learning. Within setting up a climate, it is necessary to consider the physical environment as well as the psychological environment. Within the physical environment, Knowles (1984) suggested moving away from the more traditional lecture-type room and moving toward a meeting room, with five or six students sitting around tables.

When creating a psychological climate, Knowles (1984) advocated for a climate of mutual respect where all learners feel respected and valued. In addition, a climate of collaboration is necessary. This climate allows peers to access one another as a source of learning. Next, a climate of mutual trust is required. Knowles (1984) noted that people learn from those they trust. By trusting learners, a facilitator can build trust. In addition, a climate of supportiveness is conducive to learning. Accepting learners builds support. It is also possible to define the facilitator's roles as the role of a helper (Knowles, 1984). The organization of peer-support groups can facilitate learning if the facilitator models and instructs on how to support one another. Another way to facilitate learning is to create a climate of openness and authenticity (Knowles, 1984). When the facilitator is open and authentic, the students will adopt the same belief. Openness allows students to be honest and take risks, which can lead to greater learning. Another factor of the psychological climate included creating a climate of pleasure. Knowles (1984) believed "learning should be one of the most pleasant and gratifying experiences in life; for, after all, it is the way people can become what they are capable of being

– achieving their full potential" (p. 16). Learning should be fun, not a chore. Lastly, learners need a climate of humanness. When learners believe the facilitator is treating them as a human, they will be more likely to learn (Knowles, 1984).

Involving learners in mutual planning. Knowles (1984) believed in the learners taking an active role in their own education. He stated:

> There is a basic law of human nature at work here: people tend to feel committed to any decision in proportion to the extent to which they have participated in making it; the reserves is even more true – people tend to feel *uncommitted* to any decision to the extent that they feel others are making it for them and imposing it on them. (p. 17)

Therefore, the facilitator can suggest several optional possibilities for activities and have groups decide to use their preferences. In addition, the facilitator can use a planning group to discuss the next steps in the students' education (Knowles, 1984).

Involving learners in diagnosing needs. Knowles (1984) felt that it was necessary to involve students in diagnosing their own needs. Suggested methods include using checklists, competencies, and questionnaires. These methods lessen the challenges of the misalignment of what the learners believe to be their needs with the needs the organization has set for them (Knowles, 1984).

Involving learners in formulating learning objectives. Learning contracts can facilitate this step as well as the next three steps. Students, along with the facilitator's input, create learning contracts (Knowles, 1984). In addition, small groups of peers review the learning contracts in order to allow the learner to gain suggestions and strengthen the plan. The first step of a learning contract is using the data gathered from the methods used to diagnose the needs of

the learners. After learners have diagnosed their needs, they formulate their needs into learning objectives (Knowles, 1984).

Involving learners in designing learning plans. The second step of developing a learning contract is to design a learning plan. With the help of the facilitator, the learners quantify a behavior needed to demonstrate mastery of the skill as well as a plan to meet the skill. The learners determine the necessary resources and strategies to accomplish the learning objective or objectives (Knowles, 1984).

Helping learners carry out learning plans. In this process, the facilitator serves in a supportive role. The facilitator suggests resources and serves as a consultant. He or she encourages the learner and helps to problem-solve as issues arise (Knowles, 1984).

Involving learners in evaluation. For this step, using their learning plan, the learner "specifies how the evidence will be judged or validated" (Knowles, 1984, p. 19). The facilitator requires the learner to present an evidence-based portfolio. If the evidence is not adequate, the facilitator provides feedback as to how the learner can meet the learning objective and the evidence required (Knowles, 1984).

Shortcomings. To many, Knowles was a forerunner in the field of adult education as well as the first one to attempt to create a comprehensive theory of adult education (Smith, 2002). This theory separated adult learning from other learning (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Others viewed him as an innovator, as he responded to the needs in the field of adult education. Many see elements of his model in our traditional values within the system of adult education (Smith, 2002). However, others found fault with his ideas.

Some believed that Knowles uses ideas from other theories of models including a model of relationships from humanistic clinical psychology as well as good facilitation qualities

originally developed by Carl Rogers (Smith, 2002). In addition, he borrowed elements of behavior modification theory. Therefore, Knowles took theory from two opposing schools of thought: humanist theory and behavior theory. This contrast in ideas leads others to ask questions (Smith, 2002).

In addition to raising questions about the basis of his model, many wondered whether Knowles developed a "theory" (Merriam et al., 2007). Others questioned if his theory contained assumptions about learning or a model for teaching (Smith, 2002). Some wondered if his assumptions described the characteristics of adult learners, while others questioned whether children and adults learned in different ways in the first place (Merriam et al., 2007). Still others viewed his assumptions as a guideline for practice in teaching adults (Smith, 2002). Blondy (2007) noted that his assumptions were not based on research. Instead, Knowles developed the assumptions following his personal experience, observations, and the influences of other theorists. Houde (2006) felt that Knowles' model would be very challenging to empirically test. Researchers would need to develop new instruments (Houde, 2006).

Still others raised questions about Knowles' learning contracts. The literature on adult learning is similar to the steps Knowles describes in his learning contracts (Smith, 2002). Some believed that Knowles' learning contract steps are far too linear and that learning is not always a systematic process. Chance and certain circumstances usually play a role in adult learning (Smith, 2002). Throughout his career, he abandoned his ideas of "andragogy" and "the mature mind," two labels used in marketing self-directed learning (Carlson, 1989). Later, he also stated that he felt andragogy, which he previously presented as a theory, was more to serve as a conceptual framework (Merriam et al., 2007).

Despite the shortcomings of Knowles' work, his Andragogical Model is a good fit for

describing the learning of future special education teachers. This model describes the quality of learning needed for special education teachers, especially those later in their programs. The assumptions and elements of process design can provide special educators with a strong foundation that will allow access to experiences and skills in order to be successful as they move into their careers in schools.

Use of the Theoretical Frameworks

Both of the aforementioned theories described have a strong place in this study. Each influenced the methods of this study. In the following section, I describe the similarities of the two theoretical frameworks. Next, I explain how I used each of the theoretical frameworks throughout the duration of this study.

Similarities of the Theoretical Frameworks. Wenger's (1998) Social Theory of Learning and Knowles' (1984) Andragogical Model share some commonalities. One of the most obvious similarities is the focus on the learners' past experiences. Wenger (1998) believed that learning is an individual process, but that learning occurs from one's experiences with others, usually in a Community of Practice. Knowles (1984) believed that adults are self-directed learners. Adult learners require a curriculum and tasks that allow them to use their experiences to learn and help others learn (Knowles, 1984). In addition, another similarity of the two theoretical frameworks is how adults gather and interact with new experiences. Adults are intrinsically motivated and ready to learn when they need to solve a problem or perform a task more efficiently in their lives (Knowles, 1984). Similarly, Wenger (1998) believed that adults use their life experiences to rethink learning, based on situations and outcomes they encountered.

Wenger's Social Theory of Learning. Wenger's (1998) theory allowed me, as the researcher, to view the educator, through qualitative methods, as a member of several social

communities that affect the educator's practice. In order to determine which social communities educators valued, I asked them to talk about which environments produced their greatest learning and experiences to prepare them as special education teachers. In addition, I viewed the beginning teacher as a reflective learner based on experience. Therefore, I asked teachers to provide specific examples from their training or their current jobs. Many participants did this without much prompting, while others required direct questioning for examples. Wenger (1998) believed activities from both past and future into the present characterize an individual's identity. I sought information regarding teachers' synthesis of teacher preparation as well as new learning. Therefore, I asked about the learning from their college years as well as their learning on the job or from other aspects of their lives such as previous jobs or fields they studied.

Wenger (1998) linked learning to social participation. In addition, this theory involved the concept of rethinking the learning (Wenger, 1998). An interview, social in nature, caused participants to reflect through questioning and rethink the learning. Educators rethink learning often as they are looking to improve their practice. For example, two of the teachers I interviewed were able to rethink their learning related to their special education licenses preparation. One reflected on her college or university program and questioned why scheduling was not part of her preparation. She was able to brainstorm a task that would have helped her learn this skill. Another participant rethought her student teaching experience as she hoped for more responsibilities. She suggested a checklist with tasks required by student teachers in order to have experiences in certain areas. Wenger's (1998) theory also focused upon Communities of Practice as organizations or groups that cause increased learning. Knowing this information guided my interview questions to ask about learning communities that have contributed to the participants' training.

Wenger's (1998) theory stressed the integration of the four related components as a process of learning and knowing: meaning: learning as experience; practice: learning as doing; community: learning as belonging; and identity: learning as becoming (Wenger, 1998). Therefore, I analyzed data along these lines. As teachers discussed their preparation, I looked for those elements.

Knowles' Andragogical Model. The beliefs of Knowles (1984) assisted me in gathering data on the methods used in pre-service teacher's education. Knowles' (1984) Andragogical Model assumed five assumptions about learners. One assumption viewed learners as self-directed individuals (Knowles, 1984). Through questioning about types of learning, I was able to see how participants viewed themselves, as learners, in their teacher preparation program. A second assumption of Knowles' (1984) was defining learners as those who draw on their experiences. As adults reflect upon their experiences, they develop. Through interviews, I provided participants with an opportunity upon which to draw and reflect. During an interview, one teacher who had earned several licenses was able to reflect upon the differences in his training. He was able to give specifics of why he was less prepared to teach in special education than from his other fields of physical education and health.

In addition, Knowles (1984) discussed a readiness to learn. Interview questions focused upon the need for certain information provided during teacher training classes. The next assumption described by Knowles (1984) included an orientation to learning, which is a problem-solving approach to learning. During interviews, I questioned the relevance of topics or job skills that were taught in order to look for a problem-solving approach. The last of Knowles' (1984) assumptions in the Andragogical Model was the motivation to learn. In my interviews, I

asked participants to describe the process in which they chose to become a special education teacher.

Like Wenger's (1998) theory, Knowles'(1984) theory also viewed adult learning as an interactive process. Knowles' (1984) theory focused upon the instructor-learner relationship. In this model, field experiences, simulations, and discussion are important (Knowles, 1984). Therefore, I framed interview questions around the knowledge gained from these experiences. In addition, this model assumed that adults seek out their own learning when they feel as though they need to in order to be more efficient or to remediate an issue (Knowles, 1984). I sought answers around the concept of readiness to learn. I wondered if college students were ready to learn when the topics they were learning were not actually occurring in their lives as students. Were they more ready to learn as they were on the job? Did they need to seek out knowledge on their own? I analyzed data provided by beginning special education teachers with Knowles' (1984) theory in mind.

Knowles (1984) also believed in the involvement of learners in the planning of their own instruction. A student's commitment is stronger when he or she is part of the decision-making process (Knowles, 1984). Through interview questions, I sought information regarding the student's involvement in planning, which allowed me to analyze data with the concept of student choice and student planning in mind.

Validity, Generalizability, and Ethics

In the following sections, I describe how I addressed validity and generalizability. In addition, I present information regarding ethical considerations. Lastly, I described measures I took to keep data confidential.

Validity

Maxwell (2005) alluded to the fact there are no methods that guarantee validity. Instead, Maxwell (2005) stated that validity "depends on the relationships of your conclusions to reality" (p. 105). There are strategies I used to assist with validity. These include addressing my own bias as a researcher and using triangulation.

Bias. Qualitative research is based on the premise that "researchers bring their own worldview, paradigms, or set of beliefs to the research project" (Creswell, 2007, p.15). Maxwell (2005) stated that "separating your research from other aspects of your life cuts you from a major source of insights, hypotheses, and validity checks" (p. 38). Therefore, my role as a special education teacher of ten years affected my research. My role as a teacher as well as my experience as a student in an undergraduate program provided me with insight as a researcher. These experiences guided me in asking interview questions as well as follow-up questions. In addition, my experiences allowed me to easily understand educational language and what participants meant as they spoke of their experiences.

In addition to providing insight, my experiences brought bias. Bias is the "subjectivity of the researcher" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 105). In qualitative research, the voice of the researcher is important in order to add to the topic (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Regardless, of the importance of the researcher's voice, "researchers guard against their own biases by recording detailed field notes that include reflections on their own subjectivity (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 38). I addressed my biases in the observer comments that I kept. I describe them in the following paragraphs.

As a special education teacher conducting research around this topic, I surely demonstrated biases. I earned my first special education license from a reputable program at a

strong university. I felt that my training as a special education teacher was very strong. Despite the positive college experiences, I still felt that I was lacking in certain areas, which became evident during my first years. I was tuned in when participants had similar struggles to my own. I was careful to report the exact words from the participants. However, I needed to make choices regarding what data to include and what data not to include.

In addition, another of my biases includes the belief in a need for a face-to-face special education teacher training program. One of the participants had earned her degree from an online program. While I do not believe that an online program can be as strong as a face-to-face program, I was careful to enter the interview with an open mind. Despite my thoughts on this program, the teacher was extremely insightful. I included numerous quotations from her throughout my findings.

Lastly, I believe that elementary and secondary special education teachers are quite different. In addition to having different jobs, elementary and secondary special education teachers seem to have different personalities in my mind. I have always believed that elementary teachers are far more caring. I did my best to set my beliefs aside and truly listen to participants and ask follow-up questions instead of making assumptions. I was surprised to see the caring traits that secondary special education teachers exhibited.

Triangulation. In addition to addressing biases, triangulation is another strategy used to assist with validity. Triangulation is the collection of data from multiple sources and methods (Maxwell, 2005). Researchers use triangulation to reduce biases and the limitations of one method of data collection (Maxwell, 2005). One method of triangulation I used included interviewing a variety of teachers at all levels of K-12 education. In addition, I interviewed teachers who work with students with a broad spectrum of disorders from less severe to more

severe. Teachers also worked with students with various disabilities. Despite the variety in the environments of the teachers including the age, severity of the disability, and disability type, the findings remained similar across the factors. These factors contribute to the validity of this research.

Generalizability

Generalizability is a term used to describe study findings that "hold up" beyond a certain setting and specific subjects (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 36). Maxwell (2005) distinguished between internal and external generalizability. Internal generalizability refers to the ability to generalize findings within a group of people or setting; external generalizability, on the other hand, is generalizability beyond a certain group of people or setting (Maxwell, 2005). Some qualitative researchers do not seek generalizability (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Maxwell, 2005).

Generalizability was not a major goal of this study. Instead, I was seeking to see how beginning teachers interact with their college or university special education teacher preparation. In doing so, I am able to provide recommendations to colleges, universities, and policymakers in the field of special education.

Ethics and Confidentiality

In this study, I treated all participants in accordance to the ethical guidelines of the University of St. Thomas's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Participating in this study was voluntary. The study had minimal risks, including the discovery of participant participation by coworkers and employer. I shared these potential risks to the participants. To mitigate risks, I used pseudonyms for participant and employer names in the interview transcriptions; therefore, all participation in this study remained anonymous.

The records of this study remained confidential. In any sort of report I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify participants in any way. The types of records I created include recordings, transcripts, personal notes, and analysis in order to complete my dissertation. My dissertation chair and committee reviewed the analysis. I destroyed hard copies of analysis summaries once reviewed, and I erased digital recordings once they were transcribed. I stored transcriptions and copies of my analysis and notes on locked files on my personal hard drive.

Chapter Summary

In Chapter Three, I presented a methodology of this study. Within this methodology section, I presented a rationale for my qualitative approach to research, sources of data, and data collection and analysis methods. I presented and described the two theoretical frameworks used: Wenger's (1998) Social Theory of Learning and Knowles' (1984) Andragogical Model of Learning. In addition, I discussed how these theoretical frameworks are similar and how I used them to guide my research. Lastly, I presented the validity, generalizability, and ethics considered in the study.

Chapter Four: Teacher Views of their Preparation Program Findings and Analysis

This qualitative study attempted to answer the following three questions: Do beginning special education teachers feel that their college or university training was sufficient? Do beginning special education teachers feel that there is an overlap in the knowledge and experiences colleges and universities provided with their current practice as special education teachers? According to beginning special education teachers, how can colleges and universities better prepare special education teachers for their careers? In the following chapter, I provide the findings of 13 interviews as well as an analysis of the findings using two theoretical frameworks: Wenger's (1998) Theory of Social Learning and Knowles' (1984) Andragogical Model of Learning.

Findings

In the following section, I present the findings of 13 semi-structured interviews regarding first, second, or third year special education teachers' views on their college or university teacher-training program. First, I provide the roles and responsibilities that the 13 special education teachers described. Next, I describe a typical day for a special education teacher based on information from the teacher interviews and my own experiences. Lastly, I present additional findings from my interviews with special education teachers. I organized the findings into two larger categories including effective teacher preparation and insufficient teacher preparation. Using the data collected, I presented themes within each category. In terms of the effective teacher preparation category, the three themes I identified were classroom experience, behavioral interventions, and work experience and other training. Under the second category of insufficient teacher preparation, I identified five themes including paperwork and legalities, academics and curriculum, scheduling, time management, and lack of experiences and expectations.

Scheduling, an insufficient teacher preparation theme, was unique to elementary special education teachers due to the nature of the school day. The findings presented contained the words of the 13 first, second, or third year special education teacher participants.

Special Education Teacher Roles

While all of the 13 teachers have already obtained or are in the process of earning a special education license and training, each described the duties of their work related specifically to their job. Molly, an elementary resource teacher, described her duties as "A lot of times, it's helping be a problem solver. It's helping be a support system for the kids, just knowing the students." Deb, a center-based autism teacher describes her role as:

> Creating and implementing IEPs for students with autism or other social and language disabilities. Along with teaching them the basic academics of all subject areas because they're in my classroom typically 90% of the day, unless they can get out more. Just making sure that they're able to have a safe and conducive learning environment to their needs, their educational and social needs.

Scott, a high school teacher answered a question regarding the roles and responsibilities of his job as "a loaded question." He went on to say, "I view myself as an advocate for the students." Kelly, a middle teacher states, "There are a lot of responsibilities." She continues to describe her roles with completing paperwork, teaching academics, and communicating with parents:

> With the kids I case manage, just kind of being responsible for their yearly IEP, three years, every reevaluation or initial evaluation if kids are initially qualifying. And then more academically, I have taken on more of a reading role at my school so kind of teaching various reading skills. Some kids need more of the fluency and decoding. Some are more at the higher comprehension levels. So I have reading classes. Then I

> also have resource, which is more like a guided study hall classes, helping kids with homework completion, making sure they're getting all their work done in their regular ed classes, just kind of monitoring grades and then a lot of responsibilities with communicating with parents too.

In Table 4.3, I include the roles and responsibilities each special education teacher verbalized that are unique to their jobs.

Table 4.1

Special Education Teacher Roles and Responsibilities.

Teacher's Name and Level/Area Taught	**Roles and Responsibilities of the Job**
Alyssa Elementary EBD Resource	Primarily, I was the EBD resource room teacher, so most of my caseload reflected EBD/OHD [Other Health Disabilities] students. I taught some academics. I taught reading and math to third grade groups. And then the rest of my day was spent teaching social skills, working with different groups, kids who were on the autism spectrum and some kids with EBD as well. Just being called to classrooms, helping calm down situations, and just being supportive of the students. I'm also in charge of doing the paperwork for my kids and working with general education teachers.
Barney Middle School Center-Based EBD	I have a small advisory group doing social skills, my caseload. I teach math for middle schoolers in 6th, 7th, and 8th with a lot of modifying curriculum, trying to help them play catch-up, or maintain their skills. I'm responsible for all the due process, from progress reports, evaluations, IEPs, monitoring due dates, things like that. And making sure that all the data is kept up-to-date on a daily basis to see how they're doing, to any sort of program changes warranted, making sure the data is there if that is needed.
Dana Elementary Center-Based EBD	I write and implement IEPs for kids with behavioral challenges. They spend most of the day in my room so I teach everything – all the subjects, reading, writing, math, social skills, social studies, science. I try to catch them up so they can learn in a regular class, but they have to be able to deal with social issues. They have to know how to handle themselves in stressful situations. They have to – they can't hit or swear or kick or yell or they get sent back. Most of them are in my room most of the day. Some don't want to leave. And the work is too hard for most of them.
Deb Middle School Center-Based Autism	The roles and responsibilities of my current job include creating and implementing IEPs for students with autism or other social and language disabilities. Along with teaching them the basic academics of all subject areas because they're in my classroom typically 90% of the day, unless they can get out more. Just making sure that they're able to have a safe and conducive learning environment to their needs, their educational and

	social needs. I worked with nine, no ten, kids last year in mostly 7th and 8th grade. I teach reading and math and social skills. I also teach life skills, things these kids will need when they get older. I do cooking and budgeting. I help with problems – sometimes social things or behavior. I work on everything for them to be successful and fit in. I write IEPs and talk with parents. I work with parents to have them do homework.
Jacqueline Elementary LD Resource	This past year, I case managed about 20 students. That involves writing and implementing their IEPs. That involves communicating with their parents and their general ed teachers. It involves planning individualized curriculum for whatever area that they may need, be it reading, writing, math, social skills, organization, work completion, etc. I have students with lot of different disabilities - LD, EBD, OHD, autism, and students with physical impairments. It also involves directly working with students and supervising paraprofessionals.
Jessica High School EBD Resource	This last year, I taught reading classes. Next year, I might have math. I also have two study hall classes. So I have kids in my reading classes that are on my caseload and then I have other kids, kids not on my caseload. And that means I talk with their case managers a lot. For my study hall classes, I help kids with everything like organization, getting work done, getting late work, working through classroom problems, social things, kind of everything. And I call parents a lot. I want my kids to do well and graduate. Parents need to know what is going on in school whether they want to.
Katie Middle School LD Resource	Last year, I taught reading classes. I had 7th graders on my caseload. I taught two Sonday classes and a Read 180 class. I guess that was co-taught. I also have a study hall class.
Kelly Middle School LD Resource	There are a lot of responsibilities. With the kids I case manage, being responsible for their yearly IEP, three years, every reevaluation or initial evaluation if kids are initially qualifying. More academically, I have taken on more of a reading role at my school so kind of teaching various reading skills. Some kids need more of the fluency and decoding; some are more at the higher comprehension levels. So I have reading classes. Every single year, it's kind of been changing with the different classes I have been teaching so I haven't taught the same thing every single year.

	And then I also have resource, which is more like a guided study hall class, helping kids with homework completion, making sure they're getting all their work done in their regular ed classes, monitoring grades and then a lot of responsibilities communicating with parents.
Laura Middle School LD Resource	I was the sixth grade teacher last year. I write IEPs for the kids I case manage. I work with them on reading and math to meet their goals. I have small classes, classes that are well different than the others. I work on IEP stuff, like basic reading or some comprehension. I help kids with getting work done. Two years ago, I taught an organization and work completion class, not last year though. I modify assignments and make things less overwhelming. I make sure it's okay with the other teachers. I work with parents too.
Molly Elementary LD Resource	Obviously helping students work toward their IEP goals, communicating with the general ed teachers, special ed teachers. Helping communicate with paras and figuring out what's happening in the gen ed. I think there is such a breakdown that I'm not in there and then it's hard because you hear things from all different viewpoints and you wish could be in there seeing it and I like to be in it so I can give the best advice that I can. A lot of times, it's helping be a problem solver. It's helping be a support system for the kids, just knowing the students. The responsibility of if they come in and they've had a super tough day, sometimes the academics just aren't going to happen. Sometimes you just have to address other things before it can happen and the roles of planning and actually teaching them, which is just one of the so many hats you wear in this position that I just felt that this year. Then there's the paperwork.
Scott High School EBD Resource	I guess I view myself as an advocate for the students. By no means does it all fall on us or the parents specifically. It falls on the students. It's their education so they need to show ownership. I'll talk to parents. I'll talk to students and encourage them. Ultimately, if they want to sit and sleep in class, how do we change that kind of thing? So I try to be a tool for them, a resource. A lot of times, they just need someone to go talk to, somebody that's not their parents. So, there's the teaching piece, there's the rapport with students, somebody they're comfortable with. I work with students who are depressed and have those types of issues, so just being that therapist or somebody to go to. When behaviors occur or getting students to look long term. So, as far as what I do for my role, it really depends on each kid. Because it is individualized and specialized.

	So what does each kid need? And how can I help them?
Travis High School LD Resource	Well, I teach one class in this room. There are three students and these students are low in math. And they do not have a regular ed math class. And those are 10th grade students right now. For the last three years, it has crossed across grade levels so I've had students from different grade levels in the same classroom. And what we do is we actually support our math support class. It's called Math Strategies or Key Concepts Math and I co-teach with Angela this year 9th, 10th, and 11th grade Math Strategies. So those kids who come in here then to get a second dose of the same stuff.
Wanda Elementary Center-Based Autism	Well, I have 7 kids and all but one have autism. I teach the basics. They are young and many don't know school things like their letters or numbers or counting. I also teach the obvious things like social skills, how to ask to play, how to ask for help, what to do if you get mad. I use lots and lots of pictures and little words. I try to mainstream my kids if they can handle it. Two paras work here so it's a lot of scheduling and rescheduling. We just try to make it work. I write IEPs and keep data, lots of data. I plan lessons for me. I plan lessons for the paras. I do a lot of stuff.

This table includes the specific roles and responsibilities of each special education teacher interviewed.

It is clear that these teachers feel as though they have many duties. In fact, it is evident that teachers were not able to clearly state their job duties. This could be because they have many duties, which conflict with one another. It could also be because school districts have not specified the actual job duties of special education teachers. Another reason for the difficulty articulating job duties could be that duties change from year to year depending on the needs of students.

Based on my own experiences as a special education teacher, I know that my job duties vary from day to day, depending on the needs of students. This is especially because I work with several students with behavioral disabilities or behavioral challenges that often stem from their disabilities, as do many special education teachers. The job duties also vary with the day because I work with a large percentage of students who come from low-income backgrounds. Their economic backgrounds present other challenges that often interfere with learning. The duties seem to include teaching students a variety of topics to students with diverse needs. In addition, many teachers talked about completing IEPs and evaluations. Several of the teachers discussed advocating for the students, problem solving, and communicating with parents. In the following section, I used the information from the 13 special education teachers interviewed as well as my own knowledge and experiences to describe a typical day for a special education teacher. I tried to include the perspectives of special education teachers across age ranges, disability categories, and disability severity.

A Day in the Life of a Special Education Teacher

Typically, special education teachers begin their day with meetings. There are several different types of meetings in which special education teachers participate. Special education teachers often meet with parents. During these meetings, teams of professional meet with

parents to review educational testing that completed at school to determine if struggling students qualify for special education services. Otherwise, special education teachers might meet with parents at annual IEP meetings in which teams discuss the progress students made toward the previous year's IEP goals as well the student's current needs. Following this meeting, the special education teacher will write the annual IEP based on the needs identified by the team. A special education teacher also serves on a student needs team, which typically meets weekly. This team analyzes the progress of students who are struggling in the school. The student needs team may determine possible interventions to try or may make the determination to assess the student to determine if he or she is eligible for special education services.

If special education teachers are not participating in meetings, he or she may begin their day checking in with general education teachers to ensure that the accommodations or modifications in the general education classrooms are taking place and are effective. Based on what the general education teachers say, a special education teacher may decide to change accommodations or modifications in the classroom. Special education teachers also spend time collaborating with other special education staff such as speech and language therapists or occupational therapists to ensure all staff are using strategies to best support the students' needs. A teacher also may spend time planning his or her upcoming lessons, completing paperwork such as IEPs or evaluation reports, or communicating with parents.

Generally, during the school day, special education teachers work with students with similar needs in small groups in a special education setting. The group size varies from one students up to near fifteen students, depending on the class or severity of student needs. In middle schools and high schools, special education teachers often team-teach classes with a general education teacher. Both general education students and special education students make

up these team-taught classes. Students in a resource setting typically spend a larger portion of their day in the general education setting with their typically developing peers whereas students in a center-based classroom typically spend the majority of their day in the special education setting due to the severity of their needs.

In a resource setting, small groups of students enter the special education classroom, receive their specialized instruction in their area or areas of need, and return to their mainstream classes. Typically, the special education teacher has worked with the classroom teacher to ensure the student has modifications or accommodations in the classroom to be successful. Students in center-based classrooms may mainstream into general education classrooms for a portion of their day, often with paraprofessional support, but are more likely to spend the majority of their day in their special education classroom. Therefore, center-based classrooms often look different from resource classrooms. A resource teacher often serves more students, usually around 20. In contrast, a center-based classroom usually has less than 10 students. Paraprofessionals are an important addition to each of these classrooms, assisting students in both the special education classroom as well as the general education classroom.

In both settings, the teachers' responsibilities include delivering instruction that will allow students to make progress toward their IEP goals. The goals could be in numerous areas including academics, behavior, social skills, self-care, and independence depending on the needs of the students. Often time, student needs interrupt a special education teacher's day. Students with special needs exhibit a high level of need in terms of academics and behavior. Many have a low frustration level. Students in resource settings often have issues in the mainstream classroom. Therefore, they return to the resource setting in times of frustration or noncompliance. These students often interrupt the resource teacher, who is usually teaching

another small group. Special education teachers usually have systems and procedures in place for when this occurs. More severe behaviors are most likely to occur in a center-based special education classroom. Paraprofessionals are likely to assist with behaviors or the other students while a teacher is working with the students with behaviors. As a last resort, trained staff may physically restrain students in order to maintain the safety of students and staff if students become physical, violent, or aggressive. This often interrupts the education of other students in the classroom.

Per teacher contracts, special education teachers schedule a prep time into their daily schedules. During this time, teachers can plan lessons or complete paperwork. Teachers can also spend time correcting papers or communicating with parents via email or phone. However, as special education students are quite unpredictable, special education teachers do not have a guarantee on their prep time.

In addition to teaching academics throughout the school day, special education teachers are responsible for collecting data to demonstrate how students are progressing toward their annual IEP goals. Therefore, teachers typically have systems in place to collect data around a variety of topics. These topics include academic data, behavioral data, and social skills data. Collecting data can be in the forms of written work and assessments. In addition, data collection can exist through anecdotal documentation and frequency charting.

During the school day, if time allows, a teacher may complete a portion of a student's initial assessment for special education or a three-year reassessment to determine if a student continues to qualify for special education. Assessments include a variety of tasks including administering standardized assessments, conducting observations in numerous settings, and interviewing other staff regarding the student's progress in other settings. Following the

assessments, a special education teacher is required to write and report the findings.

After the students leave the school, a special education teacher may continue the tasks he or she began during the school day. These may include communication with staff and parents. Other tasks could revolve around paperwork or planning lessons. Despite the time set aside for these sorts of tasks during the school day, special education teachers do not often finish, resulting in them having to stay late or bring work home.

Organization of Findings

I organized my findings from the interviews of 13 special education teachers into two broad categories: effective teacher preparation and insufficient teacher preparation. Within the effective teacher preparation category, three themes emerged from the data including classroom experience, behavioral interventions, and work experience and other training. Within the second category, insufficient teacher preparation, five themes emerged. Paperwork and legalities, academics and curriculum, scheduling, time management, and lack of experiences and expectations make up those five themes. Of those five themes, the theme of scheduling was unique to elementary teachers. I based findings of this study upon the data gathered through semi-structured interviews of the 13 special education teacher participants.

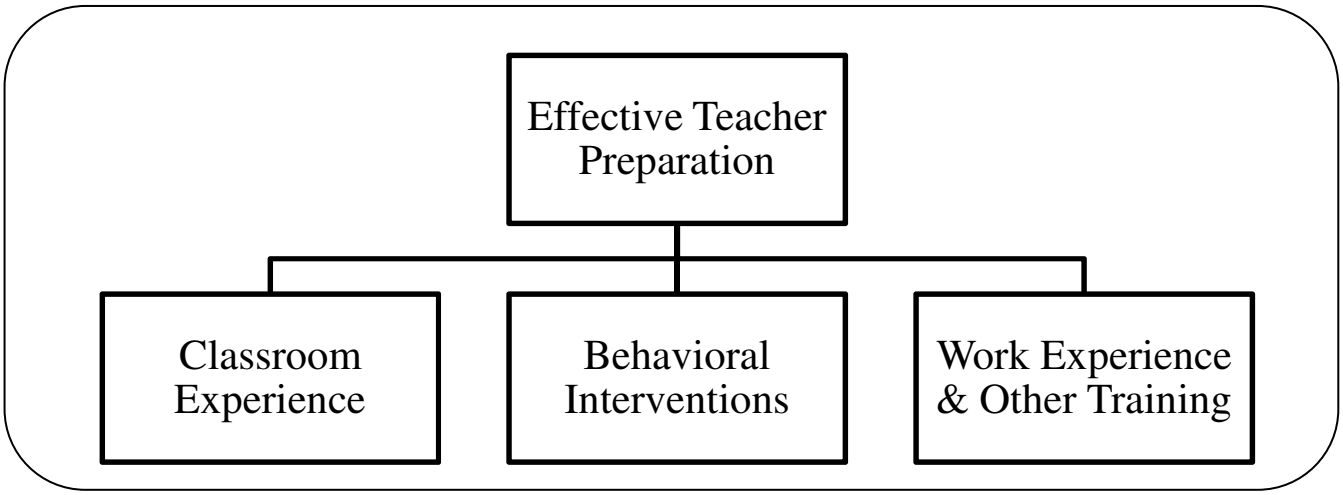
In the following section, I present the eight themes under the two broad categories of findings. The three themes under the effective teacher preparation categories include classroom experience, behavioral interventions, and work experience and other training. Paperwork and legalities, academics and curriculum, scheduling, time management, and lack of experiences and expectations make up the second category of insufficient teacher preparation. In addition, this section contains the data bits from the 13 special education teacher participants, which support the themes.

Effective Teacher Preparation

Each of the 13 participants was able to verbalize areas that were effective in their preparation to earn a special education license and become a special education teacher. In the following section, I provide information on the three themes of effective teacher preparation. These themes include classroom experience, behavioral interventions, and work experience and other training. In Figure 4.1, I present the themes of effective teacher preparation.

Figure 4.2

Themes of Effective Teacher Preparation



This figure provides a visual of the three themes of effective teacher preparation including classroom experience, behavioral interventions, and work experience and other training.

Classroom experience. Seven of the 13 teachers spoke about the importance of their experiences in various classrooms either as practicum students or as student teachers. Deb spoke of the different pre-student teaching placements that were part of her teacher preparation program. She stated:

> I feel I had a lot more opportunities in the classroom. Obviously, nothing can quite prepare you to actually being in the classroom, so I think the more you can be in the classroom with those undergrad classes and getting experiences, the better.

Kelly also had numerous classroom experiences. She stated how these valuable experiences provided her with an opportunity to gain exposure to curriculum:

> I definitely felt really prepared in my methods, differentiated math and reading especially. I felt prepared in even just from my student and pre-student teaching placements. I had a lot of work with different types of curriculum and different types of kids. I would say that was more valuable than even any of the classes, but the classes definitely gave me a solid background in that kind of stuff.

Jacqueline, who earned two teaching licenses, one in special education and one in elementary education, through her undergraduate program, also spoke about her pre-student placements and their benefits:

> I had several placements being in special ed and an elementary ed major that included observing in classrooms. I think I was in four classrooms prior to student teaching. It was so helpful to see how a classroom is run and different strategies for working with different students, students with behaviors and students with low academics.

Like Kelly and Jacqueline, Wanda supported the importance of being involved in classrooms prior to teaching and gaining experience in the community as she noted:

> I loved being able to get into the classroom one day a week before I even student taught. I think that was really effective. I just think that exposing students, getting them out there and getting them to actually work with other areas, I think that's really helpful. Another thing we did too, we were required to work with persons who have disabilities in other areas as well. So I volunteered with a group that worked with persons who were elderly that had some disabilities as well. So I think that just exposing young teachers to the actual field and getting them out there as much as you can.

Many of the teachers described their experiences in numerous classrooms. In addition, several special education teachers articulated how they benefitted from the experiences of working in a variety of settings with different cooperating teachers. Working in a variety of settings allowed future special education teachers to interact with students of numerous disability categories. In addition, the pre-service teachers encountered a range of students with special needs from those with mild disabilities to those with severe disabilities. They were able to see strategies that current special education teachers used in working with a variety of students. If successful, the pre-service teachers could add these strategies to their own teaching repertoire. These experiences also provided them with the opportunity to practice methods and strategies from their special education teacher training classes.

Behavioral interventions. In addition to having strong experiences in classrooms, several teachers expressed the knowledge and practice they had gained around the area of creating behavioral interventions for students. Dana reflected on her college preparation related to behavioral interventions:

> I think they definitely helped prepare me for how to work with students who were oppositional or defiant and some really good strategies to work with those kind of

students on certain academic areas such as reading and math.

Like Dana, Jacqueline talked about the importance of a behavior specific class as she stated, "I also had a strong behavior management class." She continued by explaining an effective assignment:

> I had to create a behavior change program that I implemented and it could be anywhere. It could be with a friend or a roommate. And I did a behavior change plan in my house with my roommates. I kept data of dishes that were actually clean after they had been washed. It was a good hands-on project and not so different from the plans I create at school.

Molly also mentioned specific examples from her behavior management course.

> We talked about ABC [Antecedent Behavior Consequence] charts. And we did functional behavior assessments, behavior intervention plans, even though a lot of times that's done more by a school psych for like the FBA [Functional Behavior Assessment] and everything, it really just taught me that behavior always has a purpose and you just need to be watching. And you just really need to think about what's happening before, what's happening after. Even if you think you're not reinforcing it, you could be. And so that was probably one of the most beneficial.

Many teachers felt that their experiences in behavior classes were helpful to their teaching. Research indicated that novice teachers struggle in classroom management and working with students who demonstrate behavioral challenges. The special education teacher participants felt that their preparation allowed them to gain adequate knowledge and experience around a variety of behavioral topics and strategies. Some teachers expressed their level of confidence in teaching students with behavioral challenges. The knowledge they gained is useful

to these teachers now. One teacher even mentioned that the college or university learning and assignments were very similar to her current job needs as a special education teacher.

Work experience and other training. Five of the 13 special education teacher participants felt as though their work experience was invaluable to their teacher preparation. All five of these participants had gained work experience as a paraprofessional in a special education program or had served as a substitute teacher. One of these five teachers, Scott, had training in another field, which lead him to believe that he had the background to understand and complete paperwork effectively.

Dana worked as a paraprofessional for five years before going back to school to earn a special education degree. She noted that she felt her experience as a paraprofessional was the most effective preparation she had:

> When I was going [to school] and taking all the classes, I had never taught before in a classroom. This was an initial licensure and special ed at the same time so I didn't have that experience of teaching in the classroom. I had been a para so I had seen how a classroom is run. And so I feel like that was probably one of my bigger areas because I was then able to take that practice and put it into place. Whereas when you are just writing a paper, you are thinking of a scenario but it's not actually playing out. So I think definitely the hands on – actually being able to have the experience helps. I was able to see what a classroom running would look like. I had seen the experience of how kids can – just because they have the same disability, it doesn't mean two kids are going to be the same by any means. They could be completely different. So I think it really opened my eyes to the different possibilities in a classroom.

Jessica also had work experience that she viewed as valuable. She worked as a substitute teacher in elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools for several years prior to becoming a special education teacher. She explained that she felt her teacher preparation program was strong in conjunction with her substitute teaching experience as she stated:

> I think that along with the experience of being a sub for so long helped. I think that somebody who is maybe just coming off the street and getting this degree would – there were a couple of people who had degrees in accounting or business and were coming to get this same degree and they were so overwhelmed. It would be interesting to see how well they felt prepared because you know I had the background knowledge. Some of these people were coming in like I said as accountants. One guy was a mail carrier. He said, "You know, I'm just looking for a change of pace." I was like, "Whoa, this is a change of pace for you."

I asked Scott, too, about what was most effective in relation to his teacher preparation program. He drew on his work experience as a paraprofessional in a high school EBD classroom for several years:

> Actually, I felt like the best way I learned wasn't even in the classroom of my grad school stuff. It was because as I was a para, I took everything we talked about and would learn, and I was able to apply it. It was almost like on-the-job training which for me. I like to be up and moving and things like that so the best way for me to learn, regardless of what type of activity it was, and be able to apply it immediately to do whatever I was doing. And then the two teachers that I worked with were awesome. I used to harass them with a bunch of questions, "What's this, what's that?" They were so helpful.

When asked about areas of training that were effective, Scott was the only participant

who felt somewhat prepared to work with the legal aspects and paperwork that are required in the job. After talking about his background in economics and his job in the business world, Scott said, “I feel like my business background is more suited for something like that.”

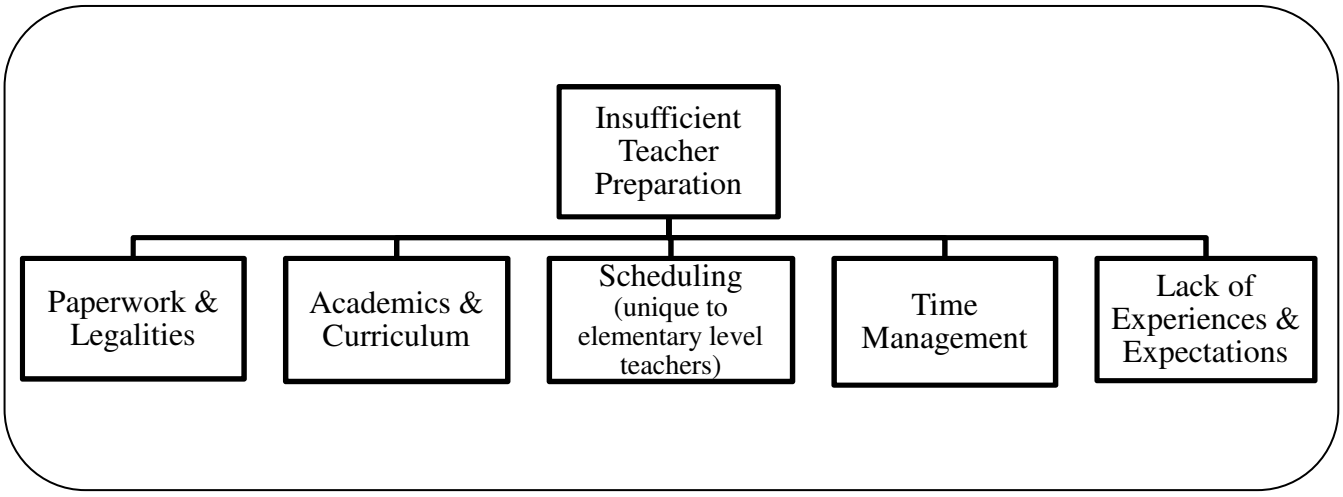
It is evident that experience in classrooms as a paraprofessional or substitute teacher is helpful when entering the field of special education as a newer teacher. These teachers were able to apply what they were learning as they were completing their special education degrees. In addition, experiences in other fields help teachers with other aspects of the job, including paperwork. I will expand on the topic of work experience and classroom experience in the analysis section later in this chapter and conclusions section in Chapter Five.

Insufficient Teacher Preparation

In addition to speaking to teacher preparation that was effective, all participants shared areas in which they did not feel prepared. The following section provides information on the five themes of insufficient teacher preparation. These themes include paperwork and legalities, academics and curriculum, scheduling, time management, and lack of experiences and expectations. In Figure 4.3, I present the themes of insufficient teacher preparation.

Figure 4.3

Themes of Insufficient Teacher Preparation



This figure provides a visual of the five themes of insufficient teacher preparation including paperwork and legalities, academics and curriculum, scheduling, time management, and lack of experiences and expectations.

Paperwork and legalities. Twelve of the 13 teachers spoke about the lack of knowledge and experience when it came to producing and understanding the legal aspects of the job, including paperwork. Jessica reflected on her first year of teaching and the struggles with knowing how to complete paperwork correctly:

> I felt completely unprepared for writing IEPs. I feel like I was very fortunate to have a good mentor I met when I was a sub. She helped me with every single IEP I think that I wrote that first year and she went through and just helped me with my wording, helped me to make it measurable. That was definitely a shocker, very overwhelming.

Like Jessica, Molly struggled with paperwork, but more so for the time it took. Molly shared her thoughts about the balance of paperwork and teaching students. She said, "I just felt like the whole year I was doing two different jobs and I don't know how you can you feel like you're being successful at both." Deb also struggled with paperwork, in relation to the amount of paperwork that is required and its interference with her teaching duties:

> And a lot of days, I would have to dedicate a big portion of my day to paperwork. I was extremely overwhelmed with the amount of assessments we had this year and the amount of IEPs we had to write. I think that is definitely the most stressful part of our job. I think obviously IEPs are very important. They determine what we need to work on with our students. I think that's great, but at the same time, sometimes I do feel like my teaching time is cut into with all the paperwork. And it's just – it can be very, very overwhelming.

Alyssa, like Deb, talked about the value of paperwork, yet the stress paperwork causes:

> The paperwork's definitely hard just because there are so many different requirements and you don't want to mess up. There's so many pressures obviously. You have to

> follow state standards and you have to make sure that you are in compliance and there's a timeline. It's just time consuming.

Barney, a center-based EBD teacher, also mentioned the frustrations with paperwork. He talked about his struggles with the subjective nature of the rules that govern special education paperwork:

> Often times, it's just so time consuming to check everything to see that it's the way it's supposed to be done, but also every place seems to have a different interpretation and when we ask the state for an answer, it's still not very concrete.

Barney continued to talk about paperwork in regards to his lack of preparation from his college or university in this area. He said, "There should be more time spent on the legal aspects of it to better prepare us because there are way too many laws, regulations, and subsections." Like Barney, Travis felt that paperwork was frustrating. He said, "It's pretty meticulous. You think you're done and then you remember you have to do three or four more things."

In addition, Kelly talked about paperwork being an area of struggle, despite her college training:

> I would say that whole like IEP writing area was the least sufficient. In college, you learn to write different types of IEPs. But when you don't have a real kid to write it with you just find one kid to do a case study on, like it wasn't good of preparation as I could have had and you feel kind of dumb going to another teacher asking, "Okay, how should I write this?"

Like Kelly, Barney talked about learning how to write paperwork though his classes and his biggest frustration with being a special education teacher. He stated the biggest challenge of the job as: "The paperwork side of it. That's really what it comes down to. There's a lot of stuff

that needs to be done and it isn't really taught to many people." Jacqueline was surprised about the legal issues and paperwork involved in being a special education teacher. She stated: "I was also surprised that – how many forms there are and the legal documentation involved in working with students with disabilities. I didn't realize it would be documenting every phone call with a parent." Kelly described her frustrations with the paperwork and the definite timelines involved in paperwork. She said:

> The paperwork is just kind of all that time. And again, other teachers have to correct papers and do things too but there's not like a legal obligation tied to things and getting all the dates right and having all these deadlines. And it's like sometimes, I would be fine if I just had, if something came up in my life, and I know I would get the IEP done next week, but legally it can't be done next week and I think that really frustrates me. Everything has gotten so tight with dates. There just isn't any leeway at all. I definitely wouldn't put off an IEP for an entire year, but it would get done, but if it's not done by that specific time it kind of just drives me crazy how we're held to all of those things.

Paperwork and legal issues were, by far, the most taxing issue for the participants. In addition to not having adequate knowledge around the area, many teachers spoke about the time that paperwork takes. Teachers were frustrated that the time to complete took away from the time working with students. In addition, teachers noted the challenges in completing the paperwork the correct way by a certain date.

Academics and Curriculum. While only a couple of participants felt adequately prepared to write and teach curriculum, many other participants raised concerns about it. They felt as though planning and writing curriculum was an area that was weak in their teacher preparation programs. In fact, Molly described her frustration teaching reading, which she

spends a good portion of her day doing in an elementary school resource room. She explained that she had a fair amount of literacy training, but still felt as though she did not have the tools or methods in her repertoire:

> I mean that was probably my biggest struggle related to academics – is teaching comprehension to kids who have such a hard time with it because it's so subjective and open ended and it's just where the kid is. And it's so on the teacher to create to the structure without curriculum, especially as a first year teacher. I was just struggling with that a lot because you just want to make sure that everything you do has a purpose and you are being as purposeful as possible. I don't want to waste anybody's time, if it's not going to benefit them.

Like Molly, Scott felt that working with academics was especially challenging. He described his first year as a high school special education teacher when a colleague gave him three boxes of teaching materials: "And I was like, 'Well, okay, what do I teach?' So you are kind of given these materials but you have to figure out what to do with them." Scott felt as though the curriculum planning and curriculum writing was a piece of his education that was weak. He stated that he had some training in that area, but not enough to plan and teach needed skills effectively. Katie had a similar experience to Scott. She described her experience as she was teaching reading to a small group of sixth graders:

> With the middle school, you have classes you have to develop, so there is kind of no guidance and there wasn't really a curriculum from a past teacher. There really wasn't a curriculum at all. So in the beginning of the year, it was kind of like, "Okay, so what do I throw together? What do I do from day to day since there was no book and I didn't have anything to go off of?"

Katie, another middle school teacher, explained the lack of materials and curriculum during her first year. When asked how she faced that challenge, she stated:

> My principal allowed me to go in my classroom two weeks before school started so I kind of just went through everything that was in this closet that was left behind and kind of just saw somethings that I would be able to work with. But otherwise, I don't know, it was just kind of whatever I could find, I just kind of pulled. I don't know. Those first few weeks were definitely rough not quite knowing what direction I wanted to take the class in.

Several of the special education teachers shared their frustrations around the lack of training with teaching, planning, and writing curriculum as well as teaching academics. In addition, the schools for whom they were working providing little guidance. It seems as though many of the participants were quite resourceful in accommodating for this lack of instruction at the college or university level. In the analysis section, I expand on the topic of academics and curriculum.

Scheduling. While scheduling was an issue unique to special education teachers at the elementary level, all five elementary teachers felt as though scheduling was truly a frustrating part of their job during their first years of teaching students with special needs. In addition, they had not received any training in this area.

Molly said one of her biggest struggles of working in an elementary resource room was scheduling. She described her thoughts on scheduling students to receive their special education time in her classroom:

> You're always feeling like things aren't perfect and as a perfectionist, that's hard; it's a tough pill to swallow. And I just had to become okay with "I'm doing the best than I can.

> This is my first year. It's not going to be perfect and I'm probably going to have to change the schedule seven times." But you just have to be okay with change. And that's a hard thing when you just want it done right the first time.

Alyssa, too, explained her frustrations with scheduling at the elementary level. In addition, she shared the process that she and another special education complete when creating student schedules:

> I think it took my co-teacher and I well over a week. We had the full white board filled with – we took a ruler and make little – like a graph on there and we filled in time slots and for a time. It's just hard because at one point, we had a group of third graders with eleven kids in it. And then on top of it, you know throughout the year, intervention teachers would change their times and all of a sudden our kids would be disappearing and we'd have to work it out with them that no, this is there special education time. You need to find a different time. Kids would be upset that they'd be missing art class or social studies. The parents would be upset about it.

Like Alyssa, Dana also has a process that she has created for creating schedules in her center-based EBD classroom. Dana described the process she uses and how the schedule changes throughout the school year. She said:

> I start working on scheduling for the school year usually at the beginning of August. I just kind of go, "Okay, I'm going to do math here, reading here and then fit in everything else the rest of the day." But it changes probably six or seven times during the school year.

Jacqueline mentioned scheduling when asked about necessary changes to her teacher preparation program. She stated that it would helpful to do some work around scheduling in a

class:

> It's very, very challenging to do a schedule in an elementary school when you are pulling kids for certain amounts of time. We had never really talked about when they could come out of class, how to group them, and things like that. To this day, I'm not sure what best practice is around that. More information and practice would have helped.

Because in middle school and high school, with set classes, scheduling is not an issue for special education teachers. Students with special needs either enroll in a special education class or a general education class. More recently, in middle school and high school, special education teachers and general education teachers are co-teaching classes. For students with special needs, a co-taught class is a special education class as the students with special needs have access to a special education teacher and specialized instruction. However, in an elementary school day, a special education teacher can pull a student from their general education for any amount of time during any subject. The elementary teachers need to work around the schedule of the general education teacher. Therefore, the scheduling issue is unique to elementary school special education teachers. These five teachers spoke of the issues involved in making schedules to accommodate the needs of students with special needs.

Time management. In addition to paperwork, teaching academics, and scheduling, many teachers voiced concerns around time management including not having enough time to complete the expectations of the job. In addition, many teachers discussed the frustrations of not having the skills to prioritize the numerous diverse tasks involved in being a special education teacher. Several teachers described how one task takes away from another task.

Alyssa described the amount of time required to complete paperwork and how that time often interferes with her other job duties, especially teaching students:

> Sometimes you do have to make a choice. And sometimes you have to choose you know what, I have to get my paperwork done. And you know then you have the kids and especially EBD [kids], a lot of times you know when I have my prep time and I'm supposed to be working on my paperwork or doing other things and my student is having a meltdown and needs me, I'm not going to just sit there and do my paperwork and ignore my job. Obviously, I have to go and do my work and go be with that student and go help them. You know then it's like great, now I'm going to be doing paperwork at home or I'm here until 7 or 8:00 at night. Or I'm doing IEPs on the weekend.

Dana, too, discussed paperwork as she reflected on her first year. She stated, "I think that the amount of paperwork I had [was a surprise]. I had a pretty big caseload my first year. I had 12 [students] at one point. I think that paperwork took a lot more of my time than I thought it would. It was hard to balance – to find a balance between paperwork and actually teaching academics and social skills and behaviors."

Jacqueline, like Alyssa and Dana described the conflict of completing paperwork and working with students. She stated:

> I think what surprised me was just how hard it was. How much there is to do, and how there is just not enough time to do it if you want to do it well. I don't mind doing paperwork, but the time it takes is time away from students or time away from planning a good lesson. But, in the end, my paperwork is tracked more than the progress I make with students or my lesson plans.

It seems as though teachers are frustrated because paperwork is time consuming, and ultimately, it takes time away from teaching kids, the reason special education teachers enter the field. However, with legal ties and funding tied to paperwork, school districts place a heavy

emphasis on paperwork. Molly and Scott echoed the issues of completing paperwork and working with students. Molly said, "There's the paperwork and there's the process and there's the due process and there's all of that and then there's the teaching. And it's just so hard to make those two balance." Around this same idea, Scott stated, "I would say that might be the toughest thing – to balance the paperwork and legal things with your actual face-to-face time with your kids and things like that. It's just finding enough time." Scott continues by saying, that he does not mind completing paperwork, but that it constantly takes away from the classroom. He says, "It's supposed to be about the learning. That bothers me. It shouldn't be about the legal issues and the law. I want it to be about the kid in the classroom. What are they learning, what are they not learning?" Ultimately, teachers feel that their goals do not align with the goals of school districts, causing tension and stress. Special education teachers stressed the importance of quality teaching and learning, while they are feeling pressures from districts to have accurate and completed paperwork.

Dana described the challenges in completing the work expected of her. She felt the struggles in trying to prioritize tasks:

> Just figuring out how you are going to get all of that work done. There seems to be a lot of work that needs to be done and figuring out how to prioritize or how to find the time to do it, which a lot of time for special ed teachers means working on the weekends or staying late or coming in early.

Molly also noticed that time management was a large part of the job as a special educator, too. She noted how she struggles with prioritizing. She explained, "I think that one of the hardest things is time management. Should I really be spending two hours on this eval [evaluation] right now or should I just be planning for tomorrow and get that set and work it on later?"

It is clear that time management and prioritizing time is a challenge for beginning special education teacher. Several teachers mentioned that they have numerous job duties. Many teachers feel torn with working with students and completing the other duties of their job, especially paperwork. Many of the special education teacher participants noted the stress paperwork causes them. Many alluded to the fact that the district for which they work tracks their paperwork. As special education paperwork is legally bound and has hard timelines, districts often track paperwork to ensure their teachers are completing it by the dates due. Paperwork is linked to both federal and state funding. Therefore, school districts risk losing money if the paperwork is not completed on time. Unfortunately, due to the need for funding, paperwork seems to be the most important task of special education in the eyes of the district. Fortunately, for the most part, special education teachers view teaching students their most important duty. Regardless, paperwork does take away from the planning of instruction as well as the direct instruction of students with special needs. The quotes of the special education teacher alluded to the frustrations they feel around this area.

Lack of experiences and expectations. While several teachers discussed the benefits of having classroom experiences and spending time in the classrooms, many expressed the need for even more experiences in the classroom. In addition, many teachers felt that more expectations while student teaching would be helpful to adequately prepare special education teachers for the duties of the job.

Travis spoke of the need for higher expectations for student teacher during their placements:

> Somehow, someway, I would like to change it so that student teachers did more, I think, but not more. I mean I look back to when I was student teaching; I had to write my

> lesson plans. I had to type word for word what I was going to do and I taught three – there was three 90-minute blocks, so I had to write 270 minutes of what I was going to say in a class every night. Now that's unrealistic because there's not a teacher that does that, but they expect student teachers to do that. I think it was too much and you did all that, and you really still weren't the teacher, and you really still didn't do a lot of things. So they expected you to do more you know paperwork, but then you still did less. So it doesn't line up to me; it doesn't match up.

Jacqueline mentioned similar frustrations to Travis' with her student teaching experience. She wished she had different experiences in her placement around paperwork:

> So the whole time I was there, I did not give an assessment, write a report, do any sort of paperwork, write an IEP. So, I didn't get that practice that many people do. So I feel like it would have been very advantageous to do that more with your supervising teacher during student teacher. So how would I change it? Maybe to have some checklists that you have to do during your student teaching to make sure you are actually seeing those things on the job.

Like Travis and Jacqueline, Kelly felt that more expectations working with colleagues and parents during student teaching would have been helpful. She stated:

> It would have been helpful, during student teacher or during the other student placements, if the student teacher would be more involved. During my student teaching, I didn't have that much interaction with parents or coworkers when there were disagreements. In student teaching, I didn't have a lot of parent interactions.

Travis, like Kelly, wished he had had different experiences in student teaching. He talked about his lack of experience with IEP meetings, "I never ran the show for an IEP meeting. I just sat

there. Well, anybody and everybody can just sit in an IEP meeting. But until you actually have to present stuff to a parent."

Molly also shared her frustrations with her student teaching experience. She student taught in a middle school special education room, but is now an elementary special education teacher. She explained how that hurt her during her first years of teaching:

> I mean honestly if I would have been placed in a resource elementary room, I mean for me, for my job right now, that would have been amazing. It just would have been night and day. So my field experience was super great, but it was great not related to this job. Teaching middle school special ed and teaching elementary special ed are two completely different jobs.

Alyssa also shared frustrations about her special education teacher program related to experiences. She was trained at a college in a "cross-categorical" program. This program allows teachers to gain three special education licenses at once. The licenses typically include LD, DD, and EBD. Alyssa felt that this type of program was not as effective as she had hoped. She explained:

> I don't feel like I was very prepared. You know I think it's great that I'm trained cross-categorical, that I have all these different disability areas that I can work with and all these grades. But at the same time, I feel like I only skimmed the surface of each disability area, of each grade area. I don't know if it's concentrated enough for me to be ready. My first year was definitely jumping in the deep end.

While first, second, and third year special education teachers were grateful for their experiences in classrooms, they felt as though they would have benefitted from more involvement and responsibilities during their placement. Many special education teachers felt as

though they were supposed to gain certain skills from their student teaching experiences, but they lacked exposure to them, which affected their first few years as a practicing special education teacher.

Analysis

While the first part of the chapter presented the finding of the 13 interviews, this section of the chapter analyzes and interprets those findings. Using analytic lenses, I was able to determine three major analytic categories that emerged from the data. The analysis of the findings is summarized in the following statements:

1) Special education teachers feel they benefit from hands-on experiences including field experiences and university or classroom experiences.

2) Special education teachers believe their work experience and other training are critical to their careers.

3) The working conditions of special education teachers are challenging and stressful.

In the following section, I provide examples and analysis of the findings.

The Benefits of Hands-On Experiences

All of the special education teachers spoke of the benefits of their experiences in classrooms including placements prior to student teaching and student teaching itself. Other teachers mentioned the knowledge and skills they gained from hands-on experiences in the college or university classroom. It is clear that both of these types of hands-on experiences led teachers to believe they were more prepared to tackle their first years as special education teachers.

Hands-on field experiences. Many novice special education teachers stated that their best preparation took place in actual classrooms of students either observing teachers or teaching

the students themselves. Most of these teachers were able to reflect upon certain moments in which they gained certain skills. It is evident that field experiences were critical to special education teachers across disabilities as well as across age levels.

Deb, a middle school special education teacher, reflected on her teacher preparation as she stated, "I think the more you can be in the classroom with those undergrad classes and getting experiences, the better." Later she stated that she would improve her program by having more time in the classroom with students. Travis, a high school teacher who had multiple licenses and who had student taught several times before returning to school to obtain his special education license, discussed the importance of having responsibilities when student teaching. Referring to his student teaching to obtain multiple licenses, he said:

> I've done if four times, four different licenses, none of it is adequate because none of it, none of it is the real deal. You just get your feet wet, but it's nowhere near the responsibilities you are going to have to do when you become the real classroom teacher. And yes, it was probably worse with the special ed license. I really wasn't prepared there.

Jacqueline, an elementary resource teacher, echoed the importance of hands-on learning in actual classrooms:

> Hands-on seemed to work the best when you are going to be a teacher. I had several placements being in special ed and an elementary ed major that included observing in classrooms. I think I was in four prior to student teaching. Each was different and I learned something new in each one.

While many teachers stressed the importance of hands-on experiences, many discussed how they required more responsibility during their classroom practicums and student teaching.

Teachers found a need to have experiences during student teaching that were similar to being an actual special education teacher. The special education teachers expressed a need to have several teacher responsibilities, write IEPs and conduct evaluations, work with other staff and parents, and facilitate IEP meetings. It is important that student teaching experiences replicate the actual responsibilities and duties of special education teachers.

Hands-on classroom experiences. In addition to having authentic experiences in school classrooms, this study's special education teacher participants frequently spoke about learning through real-life hands-on experiences in their college or university classes. Some special education teachers talked specifically about college or university assignments or tasks that involved hands-on learning experiences in the college or university classroom and then having a chance to apply the learning.

Jacqueline talked about a few strong teacher preparation classes. She described what made them strong by saying, "A lot of those good classes involved learning a strategy in class and then having to implement it with a child." She continued by saying, "It was helpful to go out and do it right after you learned how to do it." Deb remembered hands-on learning in a reading methods class. She described learning how to analyze student errors in class and the next steps to practice this task: "We had to find a kid to read with and write down all of their errors, analyze them, and then we needed to figure out what to reteach and what to teach next. I use that same sheet when I teach now." Alyssa spoke about her assessment class and the hands-on practice that it provided. She said, "I had to give the Woodcock-Johnson [a normed comprehensive achievement test given to students with a disability or a suspected disability] to my cousin. That was something that was good again – like I said, just exposure and to try and make it more realistic." Barney, a middle school EBD teacher, remembered a specific hands-on experience

that helped him understand behavior. He stated, "I remember one time we had to watch a clip of the movie *Finding Nemo* and when he defies his dad, we had to describe his behavior and create interventions."

It is clear that the teachers felt that hands-on learning tasks or simulations provided them with strong experiences that apply directly to their jobs as special education teachers. Lava et al. (2004) provided similar recommendations in a study. The researchers determined teacher preparation programs need to offer more hands-on experiences to their teachers, especially hands-on experiences in the instruction of students with special needs. Many of the 13 teacher participants stated they liked gaining the knowledge through their classes and then being able to apply it with an actual student. Hands-on tasks seemed to exist in a variety of classes including behavior classes, academic classes, and assessment classes. These classes were across disability license area as well.

Analysis. The literature by Billingsley (2001) supported the need for quality student teaching experiences. Field experiences provide future teachers an opportunity to gain practical knowledge. Special education teachers can apply these skills later in their own teaching (Billingsley, 2001). In addition, Billingsley (2001) called for exposing student teachers to the wide ranges of professional responsibilities as well as the challenges that beginning teachers encounter. Nonis and Jernice (2011) also found great value in practicums or field experiences. These experiences provided pre-service teachers with an opportunity to practice strategies and to apply the methods learned in classes at the college or university.

In looking at college or university preparation, Bishop et al. (2010) felt that teacher preparation is critical for teachers. These researchers called for quality and intensive teaching in order to positively influence a new teacher's skills and abilities. The hands-on experiences that

colleges and universities provide play a role in the quality of experiences that pre-service teachers receive.

It is clear that pre-service teachers need actual classroom teaching experiences and hands-on college or university classroom experiences in order to feel confident. In addition, the teaching experiences must replicate actual teaching that they will be doing following graduation. College and university experiences must be hands-on to allow pre-service teachers to be successful as a teacher. Wenger (1998) supported this belief in his theory of social learning. In this theory, humans learn, or gain knowledge, and make of meaning in a process with other humans (Wenger, 1998). Wenger (1998) used the concept of a community of practice to demonstrate the social areas of a learner's life that contribute to learning. A person belongs to several communities of practice and the communities change over one's life. Communities of practice include work environments, families, schools, churches, etc. (Wenger, 1998). For pre-service special education teachers, communities of practice involve the classrooms in which they complete their field experiences and student teaching. In addition, a community of practice for pre-service teachers is the classroom with their peers in which future teachers are learning together at a college or university.

Knowles (1984) also believed in student involvement in adult education. Using the Andragogical Model of Learning, Knowles (1984) viewed learners as people who are able to take responsibility for their own learning. In addition, the Andragogical Model called for experiences as starting points for learning. Pre-service special education teachers gain hands-on experiences in their college and university classrooms followed by hands-on experiences in actual classrooms with students with special needs. While all pre-service teachers gain different experiences, pre-service teachers participate in discussions allowing them and their experiences

to serve as a resource to one another. In addition, these pre-service teachers problem solve together, another aspect of the Andragogical Model (Knowles, 1984).

Wenger (1998) used the term rethinking learning. As he explained this concept, Wenger (1998) stated, "For *individuals,* it means that learning is an issue of engaging and contributing to the practices in their communities" (p. 7). In addition, this theory presented learning as a culmination of meaning, practice, community, and identity. In terms of social practice, Wenger (1998) emphasized certain ways of engagement, specifically around "everyday activities and real-life settings" (p. 13). Hands-on college and university experience provide teachers with a base of knowledge and skills. Pre-service special education teachers are often able to practice a skills or method with a peer in a college or university classroom prior to using the skill or method with an actual student. In addition, field experiences are as real-life of a setting for pre-service special education teachers prior to teaching independently as possible.

Knowles' (1984) model also described readiness to learn: "adults become ready to learn when they experience a need to know or do something in order to perform more effectively in some aspect of their lives" (Knowles, 1984, p. 11). Pre-service special education teachers would have a need to learn new information in their college or university classrooms in preparation for their actual teaching or rethink their previous learning. Following the classroom learning, pre-service teachers have an opportunity to practice their newly acquired skills during pre-student teaching field experiences or during student teaching. In addition, Knowles (1984) stated "exposing learners to more effective role models, engaging them in career planning, and providing them with diagnostic experiences in which they can assess the gaps between where they are now and where they want and need to be" (p. 11). The cooperating teachers with whom future teachers work or college and university instructors could serve as effective role model as

well as assist in the gaps in their teaching and knowledge about teaching.

Wenger (1998) also believed that people are continuously learning from their experiences. Reflection is necessary to discuss the experiences (Wenger, 1998). Therefore, pre-service teachers must have a vocabulary to make sense of and reflect upon their practice teaching with their university instructions, fellow classmates, and cooperating classroom teachers. Reflection allows for the organization of learning as well as rethinking (Wenger, 1998).
In the Andragogical Model, Knowles (1984) believed the students have the ability to take an active role in the planning of their education. To complete this process, learners diagnose their own needs using checklists, competencies, and questionnaires. To do this, a future teacher will have to rely on the reflection of their previous learning.

In the instances of pre-service teachers, student teachers could complete a diagnosis of their needs with their cooperating teacher. This method would be helpful in aligning the needs of the pre-service teacher with the needs of the university or school with special needs students. Following the diagnosis of needs, Knowles (1984) believed learners, along with their facilitators, need to create a plan to address weaknesses. Within this learning plan, the learner quantifies a behavior that demonstrates the mastery of the skills needed as determined by the checklists, competencies, or questionnaires (Knowles, 1984). Through this process, the learner determines the necessary resources and strategies to accomplish the learning objective or objectives. Before the learner carries out the plan, he or she determines how the skill is to be evaluated (Knowles, 1984). This method of developing a learning plan would be useful for pre-service teachers. They could complete this process with either a college or university instructor or their cooperating teacher. It seems that it would be most beneficial to work as a team between the college or university and the cooperating teacher at the school to maximize learning. This

method would allow the pre-service teacher with a plan to learn skills that are critical to being a successful special education teacher.

The Benefits of Work Experience and Other Training

While numerous special education teacher participants discussed the benefits of hands-on experiences in college or university classes or within their field experiences in schools, some participants also mentioned the work experience they had gained either working as paraprofessionals in special education classroom, working as substitute teachers, being a physical education teacher, or in a different field altogether. Three of the participants interviewed had work experience as paraprofessionals. One worked as a substitute in elementary, middle, and high schools while obtaining her special education license. Another teacher had experience as a physical education and developmental appropriate physical education (DAPE) teacher prior to his first teaching experience. Lastly, one teacher spoke of the benefits of working in a corporate office utilizing his economics degree. Despite the variety of experiences these teachers had gained, all spoke about the knowledge and skills they had gained, which were assets to their careers as special education teachers.

Dana, an elementary center-based EBD teacher, served as a paraprofessional in a multiple needs program for students with severe to profound developmental cognitive delays (DCD) for five years. She spoke highly of her experiences in that setting saying she learned “a ton” especially how to structure and run a classroom. Scott, too, discussed the importance of his time as a paraprofessional. Scott served as a paraprofessional for two years in a high school center-based EBD program before he became a high school EBD resource teacher. He mentioned that he was looking for a career change and when he entered the high school as a paraprofessional, he did not know much about special education. When he began taking graduate classes toward his

EBD license, he felt that his job as a paraprofessional provided him a venue to apply what he was learning in his graduate classes. Scott stated his experiences as a paraprofessional were crucial to his development as a teacher: "I took everything we talked about and would learn, and I was able to apply it. It was almost like on-the-job training." Scott continued by saying the best way for him to learn any task or concept was to "be able to apply it immediately to do whatever I was doing. And then the two teachers that I worked with were awesome. I used to harass them with a bunch of questions, 'what's this, what's that?'" Like Dana and Scott, Wanda found value in her experience as a paraprofessional in a center-based autism classroom. She stated experiences similar to those of Scott in being able to see and apply what she was learning about in her classes. She stated, "It made the learning so concrete instead of talking about fake kids. I was like, 'I have seen that. I know what they are talking about.'"

Travis was a physical education and DAPE teacher for three years before he moved into his job as a high school special education teacher. Travis felt he had already gained many of the skills necessary to work with special education students due to his experiences in his other roles. He stated:

> It was different because I had already stood in front of kids for 4 years. And so for me, it was different. I just think that standing in front of kids and doing it yourself is the best experience anybody can ever get.

Jessica, a teacher with a history education degree, worked as a substitute teacher for three years before finishing her graduate special education degree. She felt as though her experiences as a substitute teacher were helpful in a variety of ways. She stated:

> I had more confidence than brand spanking new teachers. I could handle a class, take control. I still needed to learn the special education background and methods. I was

thankful to have seen so many different classrooms and styles. Even the bad ones taught me.

Of the 13 teachers interviewed, only one felt completely prepared to understand and complete special education paperwork including assessment reports, IEPs, and numerous other forms. Scott had an economics background, which played a factor in his ability to write paperwork. When reflecting about his preparation related to paperwork, Scott stated, "I feel like my business background is more suited for something that like that anyways." Scott continued to discuss how his business job helped prepare him for teaching special education students: "In the business world, when I was there, I said the market just tanked and it was stressful and so dealing with stress in a work situation, I felt prepared to do that too." It is clear that the field of education has evolved when a business degree prepares a special education teacher to complete paperwork and handle the stress of the job today.

Analysis. Wenger (1998) advocated placing learning in the context of our lived experience. Wenger's (1998) Social Theory of Learning described learning as social participation in all aspects of our lives. Wenger's (1998) Social Theory of Learning directly applies to those gaining experiences in other aspects of education such as working as paraprofessional or as a substitute teacher. All participants in this study who worked in these roles were going to school to earn their licenses and decided that working as a paraprofessional or substitute teacher would provide them with experiences that would be helpful in their future careers as special educators. In the case of these participants, learning took place in the context of the lived experience in special education classrooms, a trait of Wenger's (1998) theory.

For these pre-service teachers, they added to their communities of practice. Not only did their communities of practice encompass their college or university classrooms, their field

experiences, but also another community of practice existed within their job as a paraprofessional or substitute teacher. These individuals could rely on several communities to rethink learning (Wenger, 1998). Through their engagement and participation in their work experiences, they were able to gain knowledge and skills that were critical to their roles as special education teachers.

The experiences of Travis, the teacher who served as a physical education teacher prior to becoming a special education teacher, were similar. His learning took place through his engagement and experiences in a school as a teacher. His school and physical education classes served as one of his communities of practice. In addition, Scott, who practiced economics in the business world, earned valuable experiences in a completely different community of practice. His experiences in this setting aided in the writing of special education paperwork as well as handling stress.

In addition to using Wenger's (1998) Social Theory of Learning, I also used Knowles' (1984) Andragogical Model of Learning as a lens to view the various experiences of the pre-service teachers in this study. Learners, in this model, are capable of taking responsibility for their own learning. In addition, this model encouraged using experiences as opportunities for learning through discussion with other adults. Adults serve as strong learning resources to one another (Knowles, 1984). In the case of these adult learners with experiences as paraprofessionals, substitute teachers, physical education teachers, and within the business world, their experiences were diverse. Their schooling was different from those obtaining a special education license through an undergraduate program. Each was most likely able to rely on their experiences and use them as learning tools for themselves and other students in their program.

In addition, Knowles (1984) discussed readiness to learn. Knowles (1984) stated "adults become ready to learn when they experience a need to know or do something in order to perform more effectively in some aspect of their lives" (p. 11). These pre-service teachers, who were gaining experiences through their jobs, attended school with the goal of becoming a special education teacher. They had a desire to learn new skills they could apply as they transitioned to new jobs. In addition, for some, their training had an immediate impact on their jobs as paraprofessionals, substitute teachers, or teachers in a different field. They were able to apply some of the skills they were learning. Knowles (1984) believed that adults enter an educational experience with a "life-centered, task-centered, or problem-centered orientation to learning" (p. 12). In this situation, these teachers were able to ask questions based on their experiences in order to gain answers to challenges they had experienced in their jobs within the field of education. Motivation is also a focus in the Andragogical Model (Knowles, 1984). These pre-service teachers were most likely highly motivated to gain their special education licenses, knowledge, and experience to improve the lives of other as well as their own lives.

The Andragogical Model "assumes that there are many resources other than the teacher, including peers, individuals with specialized knowledge and skills in the community, a wide variety of material and media resources, and field experiences" (Knowles, 1984, p. 14). Through this model, pre-service teachers are able to benefit from their own work experiences as well as the work experiences of others. Knowles (1984) believed in the learners taking an active role in their own education; therefore, Knowles (1984) believed that facilitators or instructors needed to work to involve students in a multi-step approach to learning. The first step involved self-diagnosing needs through checklists, competencies, and questionnaires. Next, students formulated learning objects based on their needs as well as a plan to meet the needs (Knowles,

1984). Last, students developed a method to assess their learning. Through this process, the students could rely on peers as well as the instructor or facilitator to gain suggestions and strengthen their plan (Knowles, 1984).

As many of these participants had gained experiences in a variety of settings, this model would be quite helpful. Each pre-service teacher would be able to assess their experiences to gather their strengths and weaknesses. From their weaknesses, they could develop an individual plan to meet their learning needs. In addition, they could create a method to assess their learning. Many of these learners would be able to complete their plan on the job while working as a paraprofessional or substitute teacher.

The Working Conditions of Special Education Teachers

The third statement of analysis is related to the job conditions of special education teachers. All of the participants described a job that is challenging and stressful in a variety of ways. Travis spoke about balancing teaching students and completing meticulous, detailed paperwork. Barney discussed the amount of time it took to search out answers on how to complete paperwork correctly. In addition to not having the skills or knowledge to complete paperwork, most participants felt that it took too much time to complete paperwork. Often, that time spent completing paperwork was time taken away from working with students, the major role of a special education teacher.

In addition, a few participants discussed a lack of materials. As a first year special education teacher, Scott discussed getting three boxes of materials while Katie mentioned digging through materials left in a closet to see what might fit the needs of her students. Molly also spoke of a lack of reading curriculum for her special education students in an elementary resource classroom. Novice special education teachers felt frustrated with a lack of curriculum

and direction to move forward with their students academically.

Analysis. These themes related to job conditions are not a surprise. In fact, much of the literature pointed to challenging job conditions as a factor leading to attrition among special education teachers (Billingsley, 2001; Billingsley et al., 2004; Eskay et al., 2012; Fore, Martin, & Bender, 2002; Gehrke & McCoy, 2007a; Kaff, 2004; Lava et al., 2004; Olivarez & Arnold, 2006; Payne, 2005; Thornton et al., 2007; Wasburn-Moses, 2005; Yost, 2006). While no participants directly stated large caseloads as challenge, several researchers did (Olivarez & Arnold, 2006; Thornton et al., 2007; Wasburn-Moses, 2005; Yost, 2006). Eskay et al. (2012) noted that teachers are required to document academic progress with their students, which caused them to spend many hours outside of the work setting to complete other duties. Many teachers in this study discussed the large amount of paperwork to be completed. The more students of which a teacher is in charge, the more paperwork he or she is required to complete.

Olivarez and Arnold (2006) stated that high levels of attrition in special education teachers might be associated with "the overall standards and expectations that come with the particular job duties" (p. 703). Many teacher participants spoke about the high standards required when it came to completing paperwork. Billingsley (2001) spoke about paperwork and other federal mandates required in being a special education teacher. In fact, Billingsley (2001) noted that many teachers mentioned that paperwork often interferes with teaching duties with both beginning teachers and veteran teachers. In another study, over three-fourths of new special education teachers indicated that other duties and completing paperwork interfered with teaching moderately or greatly (Billingsley et al., 2004). Another study supported this idea (Vannest et al., 2010). Special education teachers spend only a small portion of their day teaching students. As much teaching time is devoted to completing paperwork and other duties (Vannest et al.,

2010). According to a study that analyzed the working conditions of new teachers, nearly one-third of beginning special educators reported that the workload was not manageable at all or only manageable to "a small extent" (Billingsley et al., 2004, p. 338).

Wenger's (1998) Social Theory of Learning and Knowles' (1984) Andragogical Model cannot shed light upon the topic of job conditions. Quality training may lessen the burden and stress that special education teachers feel by allowing teachers to complete tasks more efficiently and effectively. However, for the most part, poor job conditions are unrelated to special education teacher training at the college or university level. It seems to be more of a district or state issue to lessen the loads of special education teachers.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I presented for the findings of 13 semi-structured interviews regarding first, second, or third year special education teachers' views on their college or university teacher-training program. I provided the duties that the 13 special education teachers described as well as a typical day for a special education teacher based on information from the teachers and my own experiences. I organized the findings into two larger categories including effective teacher preparation and insufficient teacher preparation. Using the data collected, I presented themes within each category. In terms of the effective teacher preparation category, the three themes I identified were classroom experience, behavioral interventions, and work experience and other training. Under the second category of insufficient teacher preparation, I identified five themes including paperwork and legalities, academics and curriculum, scheduling, time management, and lack of experiences and expectations. Scheduling, an insufficient teacher preparation theme, was unique to elementary special education teachers due to the nature of the school day. The findings presented contained the words of the 13 first, second, or third year

special education teacher participants.

Next, I provided an analysis of the findings. Using analytic lenses, I presented three major analytic statements that emerged from the data. These statements are: 1) Special education teachers feel they benefit from hands-on experiences including field experiences and university or classroom experiences; 2) Special education teachers believe their work experience and other training are critical to their careers; and 3) The working conditions of special education teachers are challenging and stressful. Lastly, I provided examples and analysis of the findings using Wenger's (1998) Social Theory of Learning and Knowles' (1984) Andragogical Model.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This phenomenological study provided 13 beginning teachers with an opportunity to share their reflections on their teacher preparation including aspects that were effective as they began their careers. In addition, this study provided beginning special education teachers with a venue to describe areas in which they needed more training or experience in order to be a successful new teacher in the field of special education. I hope that colleges and universities can use this information to better their special education teacher preparation programs. This study answered the following questions: Do beginning special education teachers feel that their college or university training was sufficient? Do beginning special education teachers feel that there is an overlap in the knowledge and experiences colleges and universities provided with their current practice as special education teachers? According to beginning special education teachers, how can colleges and universities better prepare special education teachers for their careers?

The findings of this study addressed these research questions. In this study, I organized my findings into two broad categories: effective teacher preparation and insufficient teacher preparation. From my analysis of the data, three themes emerged within the effective teacher preparation category. These included classroom experience, behavioral interventions, and work experience and other training. Within the second category, insufficient teacher preparation, five themes emerged from the analysis of the data. Paperwork and legalities, academics and curriculum, scheduling, time management, and lack of experiences and expectations make up those five themes. The theme of scheduling was unique to elementary special education teachers. Using analysis, I was able to determine three analytic categories: 1) Special education teachers feel they benefit from hands-on experiences including field experiences and university or classroom experiences. 2) Special education teachers believe their work experience and other

training are critical to their careers. 3) The working conditions of special education teachers are challenging and stressful.

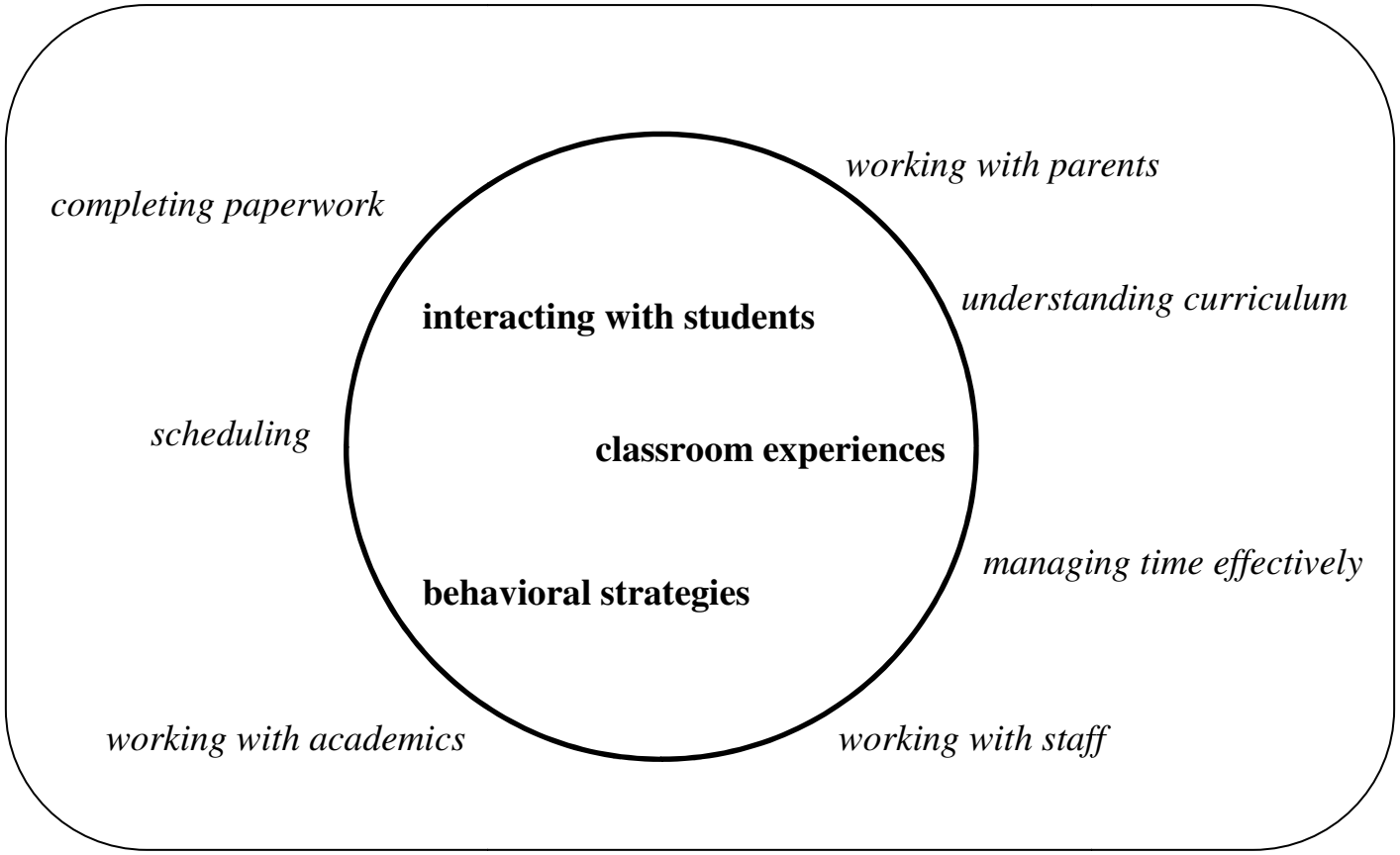
In this final chapter, I draw conclusions regarding the significance of the findings and analysis of the findings. In addition, I provide recommendations based on the findings that can take place following this study. Lastly, I provide ideas for possible future research within the field of special education.

Conclusions

Guided by the research questions and based on the findings and analysis, I developed two conclusions: 1) There is an overlap in the knowledge and experiences colleges and universities provide with current practices for those beginning their careers as special education teachers. 2) There is room for improvement in the college and university training of special education teachers. See Figure 5 on the following page for a visual representation of the college and university experiences that align with the job duties of special education teachers. In the following section, I provide a discussion of these two major conclusions.

Figure 5

College and University Experiences that Align with Special Education Job Duties



KEY
Bolded Items – Experiences that align with job duties

Italicized Items – Experiences that did not align with job duties

This figure presents the degree to which college and university experiences align with the current job duties of special education teachers.

Overlap in Training and Current Practice

The first conclusion is the belief that colleges and universities are providing special education teachers with training and experience that overlap with the current practices of special education teachers across license area and grade levels. Novice special education teachers were able to articulate several areas in which their training and college and university experiences directly prepared them to complete the responsibilities of their current jobs. Teachers spoke of specific examples of assignments or tasks that prepared them to effectively handle certain duties of their jobs during their first, second, or third of year of teaching students with special needs. In addition, several special education teachers were able to describe when they had learned a certain skills in a class or field experience that they now use in their own setting as they teach students with special needs. Novice special education teachers felt confident in their abilities to interact with students and utilize various behavioral strategies. Many were able to draw on their experiences from their classroom field experiences and student teaching. It is clear that colleges and universities are preparing students to meet some of the many demands of their jobs.

Room for Improvement in Training

While many special education teachers were able to recall useful knowledge they had learned or valuable experiences they had gained during their college or university special education training, many were also able to articulate skills or experiences that were missing from their teacher preparation. These absent skills caused challenges during their first few years of working as a special education teacher. Novice special education teachers were able to specifically state what knowledge or skills they were missing and how their job or students were impacted by that lack of experience. Some of these insufficient areas included paperwork, scheduling, understanding curriculum, working with academics, managing time effectively, and

interacting with staff and parents. Despite the missing skills, many teachers were able to compensate for these skills by applying problem solving. Some teachers asked others for help while others researched answers to questions. These missing skills no doubt caused novice teachers to feel overwhelmed. In addition, many teachers spoke of high stress levels. Modifications to special education teacher preparation programs at colleges or universities may alleviate some of these challenges that beginning teachers felt during their first years as special educators.

Summary of Conclusions

Following the interviews of 13 beginning special education teachers, I described the findings of interviews. In addition, I provided an analysis using two theoretical frameworks. Based on the findings and analysis, I determined and described two conclusions: 1) There is an overlap in the knowledge and experiences colleges and universities provided with current practice as special education teachers. 2) There is room for improvement in the college and university training of special education teachers.

Recommendations

In order to apply the two conclusions, I carefully analyzed the conclusions to develop actionable recommendations. In the following section, I provide a description of five recommendations. These recommendations are: 1) Colleges and universities should include a legal and paperwork class as part of the special education teacher preparation program. 2) Colleges and universities should have a special education "essentials" class to provide future special educators with basic special educator knowledge that they can apply on a daily basis. 3) Colleges and universities should provide student teachers with a mandatory checklist of tasks to complete while student teaching in classrooms. 4) Policymakers should consider changing

special education license from grades K-12 certification to grades K-5 and grades 6-12 certification. 5) Policymakers should determine firm caps for special education caseloads. To improve college or university training, the instructors should consider these actionable recommendations. In addition, policymakers should consider the recommendations to improve the job conditions of special education teachers.

Legal and Paperwork Class

One of the areas with which beginning special education teachers struggled the most was having adequate knowledge of paperwork expectations and timelines as well as the knowledge to complete paperwork correctly. Federal and state governments heavily tie paperwork to legalities and many teachers were unaware of these legalities. Teachers articulated the challenges in seeking answers to paperwork questions as well as the time that finding answers took from other more important tasks.

In addition, many teachers mentioned they had learned about completing portions of paperwork in their methods or assessments classes. However, many beginning special education teachers noted that there was not one specific class that taught the legal aspects required of the job, paperwork included. Therefore, they were unaware of how to complete all aspects of paperwork from start to finish including initial evaluations, annual IEPs, and three-year reevaluations. Teachers also articulated that paperwork is a large part of their responsibilities as a special education teacher.

Future special educators need one class that focuses on the entire paperwork process. This class could teach the legal steps from an evaluation to determining whether a student qualifies for special education. In addition, instructors could focus on the legal aspects of writing an IEP and the legal aspects of the special education paperwork timelines. Following

this class, teachers could receive more hands-on practice in their methods and assessments classes. The methods classes would allow them to write paperwork to specific needs such as math, reading, behavior, or social skills. The assessment class would tie in assessment, paperwork, and legal skills. A paperwork and legal class would provide future teachers with the foundation of paperwork and legalities. Ultimately, this class could assist beginning special education teachers with the knowledge and experience to complete a major aspect of their jobs more efficiently and successfully.

Essentials Class

Many of the teachers I spoke with discussed how they were unable to complete tasks expected of them because they never had instruction on how to do certain tasks. Some of these areas included scheduling special education students at the elementary level. Teachers were unsure of how long students with disabilities should receive special education service time. They realized that taking students from their general education classrooms meant taking them away from their typically developing peers, a legal aspect of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). In addition, teachers were not sure when students should be taken from their mainstream classrooms. Teachers knew they would need to miss some general education subjects, but were unsure what subjects they should miss. Teachers also questioned how to best group students together to receive their special education instructional time. Many voiced their frustrations with scheduling students and then having the need to reschedule students due to time conflicts. In an essentials class, an instructor could teach and provide strategies and practice to adequately work with the complex schedules of an elementary school day.

In addition to scheduling at the elementary level, novice special education teachers also struggled with time management. When asked, no special educators were able to recall a time

when instructors addressed time management skills in their special education teacher preparation classes. Teachers were unsure of how to prioritize tasks. Many questioned whether paperwork, as it had hard deadlines, should come first or if the teachers should spend time planning their academic lessons, as they were essential to student learning. Despite knowing that special education and building administrators tracked their compliance with paperwork and its deadlines, new special education teachers believed their students and their needs should come first. Others wondered about how much time to devote to paperwork in order to be compliant with federal and state laws. Was it important enough to complete the paperwork well or was it more important to have it completed and on time? An essentials class could address these concerns.

Another effective aspect of an essentials class could be how to invest in future staff development. All teachers desired to improve their skills and to be the best special educator possible, but many were unsure of how to do this. Teachers wondered what trainings they should seek and attend in order to improve and develop their skills. They wondered what trainings would be worth the time and which would assist with their weaknesses. While this may be a challenging skill to teach, instructors could surely address how staff develop can help keep special educators current in the field and licensed.

Lastly, some of the special education teachers articulated that they struggled with collaborating with general education teachers and parents and supervising paraprofessionals. In special education, the belief of a "team" holds strong. However, many novice special education teachers did not know how to handle conflicts with other staff and parents. They did not know how to choose words carefully and describe student behaviors or academics without offending parents or putting down the skills of regular education teachers. An essentials class could add this to its learning objectives. In addition, young special education teachers struggled with

supervising older paraprofessionals who had many years of experience. They viewed themselves as teachers, not staff managers. Many did not have skills to supervise, direct, and evaluate veteran staff members, as they never received college or university training. A class that focuses on this would provide special educators with much needed skills to complete the many tasks of their jobs.

Student Teaching Checklist

In this study, many beginning special education teachers felt as though they greatly benefitted from their student teaching placements. However, as special educators faced their first actual years of teaching, they felt that more responsibility during their student teaching placements would have been helpful. Some teachers mentioned that they did not have an opportunity to participate in the paperwork process of special education IEPs or evaluations. Therefore, a special education teacher's first experiences with these legal documents took place during their first year of teaching. They felt overwhelmed and they lacked experience in this area.

One of the study's participants suggested that colleges and universities work to create a checklist of experiences and tasks for student teachers to complete under the supervision of their cooperating teacher while acting as a special education student teacher. Items on this checklist could include assisting with the writing of an IEP, assisting with the conduction of an evaluation, interacting with parents and other colleagues, and other tasks that the colleges, universities, or cooperating teachers see fit. These experiences would lessen the burden, uncertainties, and stress that new special education teachers feel during their first year of teaching. If the novice special education teacher had guaranteed experiences in certain areas, he or she would most likely feel more confident allowing the him or her to complete certain major tasks with more accuracy and

more efficiently.

Special Education Licenses

Special education teachers earn a K-12 license in a disability area. While this broad license gives teachers the ability to teach students with disabilities in elementary, middle, and high school, they are not necessarily specialists in certain age levels or with certain content as it pertains to age levels. If special education teachers could gain experience in one certain age level area, they could complete their pre-student teaching practicums and student teaching at this level, allowing them to gain the skills necessary to successfully teach that age level.

In my study, several teachers mentioned they student taught at a different level from which they are teaching now. Two teachers stated they student taught in middle school resource rooms and both desired to spend their teaching career at the elementary level. Neither teacher had the exposure of student teaching in an elementary school or working with elementary school content. In addition, the structure of the school day in elementary school and middle school is vastly different in terms of scheduling. Becoming a specialist in either level would allow special education teachers to have training tailored to their future job needs.

At this time, regular education licenses are dividend into elementary licenses, often K-5 or K-6, and secondary licenses, usually 5-12 or 6-12. However, with certain subject areas, licenses can become even more specific such as 5-8, 6-8, or 9-12. These licenses allow teachers to gain experience and expertise with just one age group and area. For example, teachers become specialists in science at the middle school level or math at the high school level. Policymakers should consider creating specialist licenses in special education to not just narrow the disability category, but also to narrow the age group of the students. Doing this would allow teachers to become specialists at certain age group, guarantying training and student teaching

experience at one level only. This training and experience would be invaluable to special education teachers during careers.

Caseload Caps

As novice teachers discussed their special education training, they mentioned the many challenges of their jobs. They related many of the challenges to the large amount of work expected of them, especially the legal paperwork. Each student in special education requires a certain amount of paperwork including a yearly IEP based on data collected. In addition, a special education teacher is required to report written progress on all students' IEP goals and objectives several times per year. Special education teachers also assess students in special education every three years to determine if students continue to qualify for special education services. Assessments include completing an evaluation report based on testing results. The more students a teacher case manages, the more paperwork he or she is required to complete. At this time, in the state of Minnesota, there are administrative rules around caseloads. However, the caseloads set forth in the rules remain high. They also give power to local school districts to determine policy around caseloads for teachers of students who receive less than half of their day in a special education setting. There is a large percent of students who receive less than half of their day in a special education setting. This allows local districts to determine the caseloads of many of their special education teachers.

Putting reasonable caps on caseloads would allow special education teachers to have a more manageable job, not only in terms of paperwork, but also in terms of specially designed special education instruction. At this time, the state provided caseloads are far too high, resulting in teachers feeling overwhelmed, overworked, and inadequate. The special education teachers in

this study felt there is a need for paperwork, but that paperwork was taking away from teaching, the real reason they entered the field of special education.

Future Research

The purpose of this study was to understand how beginning special education teachers experience the relationship between their teacher training and their actual teaching practice. Specifically, I sought to learn if teachers felt their training prepared them to handle their first years as a special education teacher. I also wondered if their experiences could be improved.

Because I conducted this study in one school district with a limited number of special education teacher participants who were trained at colleges and universities in the midwest, further research should include a larger number of beginning special education teachers. In addition, further research should include similar studies in other school districts across the United States. More studies with a larger number of participants would prove valuable to novice special education teachers, colleges and universities, and policymakers.

As beginning special education teachers voiced their workload was too large, further research should include the workload of special education teachers as a focus. The question remains if the workload is too large or if novice special education teachers have not yet had the experience to handle the workload. A study looking at how more experienced teachers feel about their workloads and what strategies they use to handle their workloads would provide additional information on this topic.

Lastly, another avenue for researchers to explore would be looking at those gaining one special education license versus those gaining special education licenses through a multi-categorical program. A multi-categorical program usually allows special education teachers to

earn two or three licenses in the same amount of time as other colleges or universities allow special education teachers to earn one license. It is less concentrated. Future research would want to study the differences between how teachers exiting these two types of program handle the challenges of their first years of teaching students with special needs.

Chapter Summary

In Chapter Five, I drew conclusions regarding the significance of the findings and analysis of the findings. I described the two conclusions: 1) There is an overlap in the knowledge and experiences colleges and universities provide with current practices for those beginning their careers as special education teachers. 2) There is room for improvement in the college and university training of special education teachers. In addition, I provided five recommendations based on the findings that could take place following this study: 1) Colleges and universities should include a legal and paperwork class as part of the special education teacher preparation program. 2) Colleges and universities should have a special education "essentials" class to provide future special educators with basic special educator knowledge that they can apply on a daily basis. 3) Colleges and universities should provide student teachers with a mandatory checklist of tasks to complete while student teaching in classrooms. 4) Policymakers should consider changing special education license from grades K-12 certification to grades K-5 and grades 6-12 certification. 5) Policymakers should determine firm caps for special education caseloads. To improve college or university training, the instructors should consider these actionable recommendations. In addition, policymakers should consider the recommendations to improve the job conditions of special education teachers. Lastly, I provided ideas for future research within the field of special education.

References

Bishop, A. G., Brownell, M. T., Klinger, J. K., Leko, M. M., & Galman, S. A. C. (2010). Differences in beginning special education teachers: The influence of personal attributes, preparation, and school environments on classroom reading practices. *Learning Disabilities Quartlerly, 33*(2), 75-92.

Billingsley, B. S. (2001*). SPeNSE summary sheet - Beginning special educators: Characteristics, qualifications, and experiences.* Retrieved from ERIC database. (ED467269)

Billingsley, B. S. (2004a). Promoting teacher quality and retention in special education. *The Journal of Learning Disabilities, 37*(5), 370-376. doi:10.1177/00222194040370050101

Billingsley, B. S. (2004b). Special education teacher retention and attrition: A critical analysis of the research literature. *The Journal of Special Education*, *38*(1), 39-55. doi:10.1177/00224669040380010401

Billingsley, B. S., Carlson, E., & Klein, S. (2004). The working conditions and induction support of early career special educators. *Council for Exceptional Children, 70*(3), 333-347. doi:10.1177/0741932510361264

Billingsley, B. S., & Cross, L. H. (1992). Predictors of commitment, job satisfaction, and intent to stay in teaching: A comparison of general and special educators. *The Journal of Special Education, 24*(4), 453-471. doi:10.1177/00224669040380010401

Billingsley, B. S., & McLeskey, J. (2004). Critical issues in special education teacher supply and demand: Overview. *The Journal of Special Education, 38*(1), 2-4. doi:10.1177/0888406408330872

Blondy, L. C. (2007). Evaluation and Application of the Andragogical Assumptions to the Adult Online Learning Environment. *Journal of Interactive Online Learning, 6*(2), p. 116- 130.

Bogdan, R. &, Biklen, S. (2007). *Qualitative research in education: An introduction to theories and methods (*5th ed). San Fransico: Allyn & Bacon.

Boe, E. E. (2006). Long-term trends in the national demand, supply, and shortage of special education teachers. *The Journal of Special Education, 40*(3), 138-150. doi:10.1177/00224669060400030201

Boe, E. E., Bobbitt, S. A., Cook, L. H., Whitener, S. D., & Weber, A. L. (1997). Why didst thou go? Predictors of retention, transfer, and attrition of special and general education teachers from a national perspective. *The Journal of Special Education, 30*(4), 390-411. doi:10.1177/002246699703000403

Boe, E. E., Cook, L. H., & Sunderland, R. J. (2008). Teacher turnover: Examining exit attrition, teaching area transfer, and school migration. *Council for Exceptional Children, 75*(1), 7-31.

Boe, E. E., Shin, S., & Cook, L. H. (2007). Does teacher preparation matter for beginning teachers in either special or general education? *Journal of Special Education*, *41*(3), 158-170. doi:10.1177/00224669070410030201

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1976). The experimental ecology of education. *Educational Researcher, 5*(9), 5-15.

Brownell, M. T., Sindelar, P. T., Kiely, M. T., & Danielson, L. C. (2010). Special education teacher quality and preparation: Exposing foundations, constructing a new model. *Exceptional Children, 76*(3), 357-377.

Brownell, M. T., & Smith, S. W. (1993). Understanding special education teacher attrition: A conceptual model and implications for teacher educators. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 16*(3), 370-382.

Carlson, R. (1989). Malcolm knowles: Apostle of andragogy. *Vitae Scholasticae, 8*(1), 217-234.

Casey, P., Dunlay, K., Brister, H., & Davidson, M. (2011). I only wish I'd known: Voices of novice alternatively certified special education teachers. *International Journal of Special Education, 26*(1), 182-190.

Connelly, V., & Graham, S. (2009). Student teaching and teacher attrition in special education. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 32*(3), 257-269. doi:10.1177/0888406409339472

Council for Exceptional Children. (2000). *Bright futures for exceptional learners: An action to achieve quality conditions for teaching and learning.* Reston, VA: Author.

Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Darling-Hammond, L., & Sclan, E. M. (1996). Who teaches and why: Dilemmas of building a profession for twenty-first century schools. In J. Sikula, T. J. Buttery, & E. Guyton (Eds.), *Handbook of research on teacher education* (2nd ed., pp. 67-101). New York: Simon & Schuster.

DiCarlo, M., Johnson, N., & Cochran, P. (2008). Survey and analysis of teacher salary trends. Retrieved from http://www.aft.org/pdfs/teachers/salarysurvey07.pdf.

Emery, D. W., & Vandenberg, B. (2010). Special education teacher burnout and ACT. *International Journal of Special Education, 25*(3), 119-131.

Eskay, M., Onu, V. C., Ugwuanyi, L., Obiyo, N. O., & Udaya, J. (2012). Preparing teachers for special education in the United States: A reflection. *US-China Education Review,* 4, 394-407.

Fox, S. (2002). Communities of practice, foucault and actor-network theory. *Journal of Management Studies, 37*(6), 853-868. doi:10.1111/1467-6486.00207

Fisher, D., Frey, N., & Thousand, J. (2003). What do special educators need to know and be prepared to do for inclusive school to work? *Teacher Education and Special Education, 26*(1), 42-50.

Fore, C., Martin, C., & Bender, W. N. (2002). Teacher burnout in special education: The causes and the recommended solutions. *The High School Journal, 86*(1), 36-44.

Gehrke, R. S., & McCoy, K. (2007a). Considering the context: Differences between the environments of beginning special educators who stay and those who leave. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, *26*(3), 32-40

Gehrke, R. S., & McCoy, K. (2007b). Sustaining and retaining beginning special educators: It takes a village. *Teacher and Teacher Education, 23*(4), 490-500.

Gómez, P. (2009). *Toward a methodology for exploring mathematics preservice teachers' learning from a sociocultural perspective. PNA, 3*(4), 157-68.

Houde, J. (2006). Andragogy and motivation: An examination of the principles of andragogy through two motivation theories. Retrieved from: http://www.lindenwood.edu/education/andragogy/andragogy/2011/Houde_2006.pdf.

Ingersoll, R. M. (2001). Teacher turnover, teacher shortages and the organization of schools. *American Educational Research Journal, 38*(3), 499-534.

Ingersoll, R. M., & Smith, T. M. (2003). The wrong solution to the teacher shortage. *Educational Leadership, 60*(8), 30-34.

Jaworski, B. (2006). Theory and practice in mathematics teaching development: Critical inquiry as a mode of learning in teaching. *Journal of Mathematics Teacher Education, 9*(2), 187-211.

doi: 10.1007/s10857-005-1223-z

Kaff, M. S. (2004). Multitasking is multitaxing: Why special educators are leaving the field. *Preventing School Failure*, *48*(2), 27-29.

Knowles, M. S. (1984). *Andragogy in action: Applying modern principles of adult learning.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Lava, V. F., Recchia, S. L., & Giovacoo-Johnson, T. (2004). Early childhood special educators reflect on their preparation and practice. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 27*(2), 190-201. doi: 10.1177/088840640402700209

Maxwell, J. A. (2005). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Menlove, R., Garnes, L., & Salzberg, C. (2004). Why special educators leave and where they go. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 27*(4), 373-383.

doi:10.1177/088840640402700405

Merriam, S. B., Caffarella, R. S., & Baumgartner, L. M. (2007). *Learning in adulthood: A comprehensive guide* (3rd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Minnesota Department of Education (2012). Retrieved from http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/EdExc/Licen/index.html.

Mitchell, A., & Arnold, M. (2004). Behavior management skills as predictors of retention among south Texas special educators. *Journal of Instructional Psychology, 31*(3), 214-219.

Nardi, P. M. (2006). Doing survey research: A guide to quantitative methods. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Nonis, K. P., & Jernice, T. S. Y. (2001). Beginner pre-service special education teachers' learning experience during practicum. *International Journal of Special Education, 26*(2), 4-17.

Olivarez, M. M., & Arnold, M. (2006). Personal and demographic characteristics of retained teachers of special education. *Education, 126*(4), 702-710.

Payne, R. (2005). Special education teacher shortages: Barriers or lack of preparation? *The International Journal of Special Education,* 20(1), 88-91.

Sack, J. (1999, March 24). All classes of special education teachers in demand throughout the nation. *Education Week.* Retrieved from http://www.edweek.org.

Smith, M. (2002). Malcolm knowles, informal adult education, self-direction and andragogy. *The Encyclopedia of Informal Education.* Retrieved from www.infed.org/thinkers/et-knowl.htm.

Smith, T. (2006). Becoming a teacher of mathematics: Wenger's social theory of learning perspective. Retrieved from http://www.merga.net.au/documents/symp32006.pdf.

Special education (2004, August 4). *Education Week.* Retrieved from http://www.edweek.org.

Thornton, B., Peltier, G., & Medina, R. (2007). Reducing the special education teacher shortage. *The Clearing House*, *80*(5), 233-238. doi:10.3200/TCHS.80.5.233-238

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2011). Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=64.

Vannest, K. J., Soares, D. A., Harrison, J. R., Brown, L., & Parker, R. I. (2010). Changing teacher time. *Preventing School Failure, 54*(2), 86-98.

Wasburn-Moses, L. (2005). How to keep your special education teachers. *Principal Leadership,* 5(5), 35–38.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity.* New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Whitaker, S. D. (2000). What do first year special education teachers need? *Teaching Exceptional Children, 33*(1), 28-36.

Yost, D. S. (2006). Reflection and self-efficacy: Enhancing the retention of qualified teachers from a teacher education perspective. *Teacher Education Quarterly, 33*(4), 59-74**.**

Zost, G. C. (2010). An examination of resiliency in rural special educators. *The Rural Educator, 31*(2), 10-14.

Appendix A

Participant Email

Dear Special Educator:

As I embark on writing my dissertation, I am seeking individuals who are willing to participate in interviews around the topic of your experiences with your college or university training in comparison to your current practice. This is a great opportunity to let your voice be hard regarding your perspectives on your college or university special education preparation. You are receiving this email because you within your first three years of teaching. I appreciate you considering the possibility of taking part in this activity. Please contact me if you are willing to participate or have questions. I look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you,

Jill Kuehn

Appendix B

Special Education Teacher Interview Questions

Age: _____

License area(s): _____ Teaching area(s): _____

Federal Setting(s): _____

Obtained special education degree through: Graduate Program or Undergraduate Program

1. Tell me about yourself including your desire to teach students with disabilities.

2. Tell me about your preparation/schooling involved in becoming a special education teacher.

3. Tell me about the roles and responsibilities of your current job.

4. What surprised you about your first year(s) of teaching?

5. When you think about your teacher training, do you think it was adequate to prepare you to accomplish the roles and responsibilities of your job?

6. What areas of your teacher training did you feel were effective? What made them effective?

7. What areas of your teacher training did you feel were ineffective? What made them ineffective?

8. What would you change about your teacher preparation program and why?

9. What type of learning did you prefer? Examples include lectures, group activities, simulations, hands-on experiences, etc.

10. Describe your relationship with your special education instructors.

11. Where did your most effective teacher preparation take place (college/university classrooms, field experience, community, work experiences, etc.)?

12. Did your teacher preparation program involve reflection?

13. How does reflection play a role in your teaching practice?

14. How did you learn from the other students in your teacher preparation classes?

15. Did you feel as though some of the information presented in your teacher preparation classes was not relevant to you?

16. Did you have any college/university experiences in which either an instructor or host teacher provided you with a choice on assignments or tasks to meet your instructional needs?

17. Is there anything else you would like to share about your teacher preparation program?

Appendix C

CONSENT FORM
UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

The Preparation of Special Education Teachers

I am conducting a dissertation study about *beginning special education teachers' views on their preparation*. I invite you to participate in this research. You were selected as a possible participant because *you will be or have recently completed your first, second, or third year as a special education teacher.* Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: *Jill Kuehn, a doctoral student at the University of St. Thomas*

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is: to understand the views of novice special education teachers regarding the overlap of college or university training and their current practices and duties in their jobs.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to participate in a 30 to 60 minute interview as well as phone or email follow-up with additional questions, if necessary.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

The study has minimal risks that include discovery of your participation by your co-workers or employer. To mitigate risks, I will use pseudonyms for participant and employer names in the interview transcriptions - your participation in this study will remain anonymous.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any sort of report I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you in any way. The types of records I will create include recordings, transcripts, personal notes, and analysis. My dissertation committee will review the transcripts, notes, and analysis. I will destroy hard copies of analysis summaries once reviewed with my committee, and I will erase digital recordings they have been once transcribed. I will store transcriptions and copies of my analysis and notes on locked files on my personal hard drive.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of St. Thomas. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time. Should you decide to withdraw data

collected about you *will be used.* You are also free to skip any questions I may ask.

Contacts and Questions

My name is *Jill Kuehn*. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at (651) 270-9017. You may contact my dissertation chair, Dr. John Holst, at (651) 962-4433. You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-5341 with any questions or concerns.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study. I am at least 18 years of age.

_____ _____

Signature of Study Participant **Date**

_____

Print Name of Study Participant

_____ _____

Signature of Researcher **Date**

_____ _____

Signature of Chair **Date**